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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

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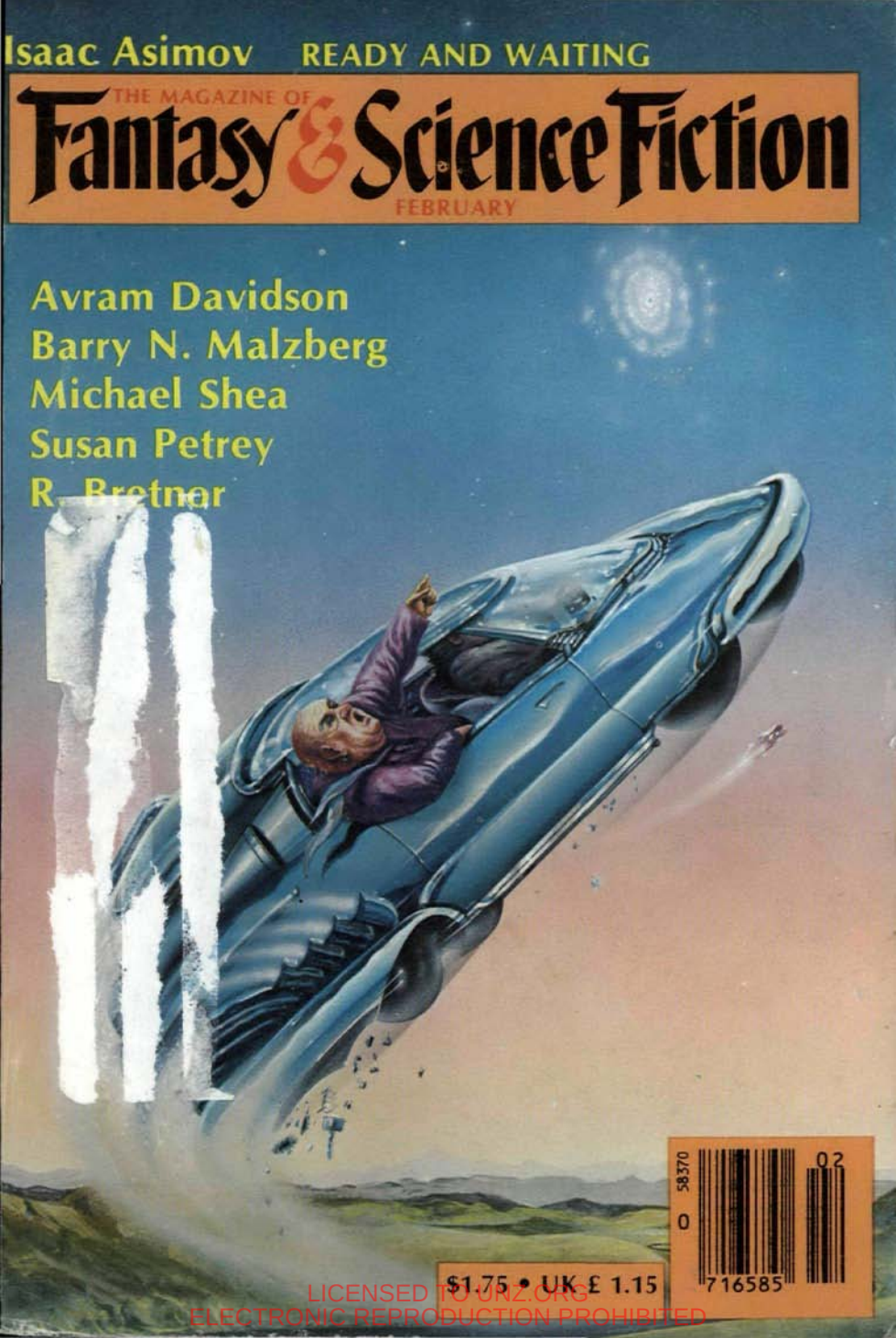

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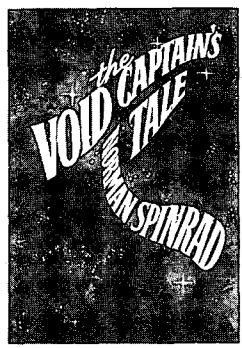

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R. Bretnor's exciting new novella concerns the principals of a company called Underseas Ltd. It begins with the abrupt disappearance of the company's most brilliant scientist along with his entire lab, which happens to be an eighty-foot submarine with an experimental drive...

Gilpin's Space

BY

REGINALD BRETNOR

I

It was strange that until he disappeared I never realized that, even though we were friends and he at least nominally worked under me, I really knew next to nothing about Saul Gilpin. He was a fey little man, with a big nose, bigger ears, and a dun-colored squirrel-tail moustache, and I knew — or at least I had assumed — that he was a chemist. (Who but a chemist, for God's sake, would name his only daughter Polly Esther?) I'd simply taken him for granted, mostly because of that discreet PH (no chemical pun intended) next to his name on the roster, meaning that he'd been personally hired either by Admiral Endicott, when he was still alive, or by Laure, his widow, neither of whom ever made a mistake about a man. In the Navy, I had been the admiral's aide, and now I was her general manager. It never occurred to me to ask questions about Saul.

But there is no better way to get questions started than for a man to vanish while there's still daylight, and not by himself alone but with his entire lab, especially when that lab is an eighty-foot still-experimental submarine safely moored between her two recently completed sister ships at the yard where they'd been built, with all three just about ready for their sea trials. Because it was past closing time and we'd shut down, only two people saw it happening: Rhoda Durfee, Laure Endicott's confidental secretary, and Dan Kellett, our chief of security. They were more or less engaged, and he'd been walking her to the parking lot. The ship didn't disappear abruptly. There was no implosion or anything

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like that. The blue-gray skin of *Cupid's Arrow* — the cute name Gilpin had given it — began, almost imperceptibly, to pale. Then its texture seemed actually to *thin*. Then it and everything inside it was seen to turn momentarily transparent. Then it was gone. Like that. Instantly, the bay surged in to fill the hole, splashed back and forth a bit, then stilled. Nothing remained — nothing but the pier, and surgically severed hawsers, and her two sisters, *Owl* and *Pussycat*, now with only that frightening emptiness between them.

Dan and Rhoda had reported immediately to Laure Endicott, as usual still in her office, and her phone call had caught me before I got past the guardpost at the gate. I wasted no time getting back to her.

She sat behind the huge, polished rosewood desk she had inherited from the admiral — just as she had inherited Underseas, Ltd., and his shipyard, his library, his gun collection, his hunting dogs. If she had not inherited his ability, it was because she had no need of it. He had died owning one shipyard. Five years later, she had three, one in Ireland, one in Brazil, all building cargo subs and tankers. She had been born French-Canadian, educated in Paris and in England, and she was one of those rare, rare women who carry all their beauty with them as they age. Her face was a seventeenth century face: a patrician nose, slightly arched brows over cool, piercing gray eyes; she wore her silver hair in one of those beautifully impossible arrangements that must take a personal maid at least half an hour to arrange. Though she was not really tall, I always felt she was towering over me. The first time Janet, my wife, met her at a party, she watched her for a while, then turned to me and said, "Geoff, tell me — your Mrs. Endicott is more than old enough to be my mother, much more, and yet every man in this room — and that includes you, my love — can't keep his eyes off her."

When I told her that she herself was much more beautiful, and that it was just *noblesse oblige*, she kicked me in the shins.

Now Laure Endicott smiled at me, a friendly smile, but with no humor in it. She gestured me to my accustomed chair at the corner of her desk. Kellett and Rhoda Durfee were already seated, facing her, Dan looked like a harried quarterback, Rhoda working her capable, shapely hands against each other in her lap.

"I shall outline what has happened," said Laure Endicott, "and then you can question Rhoda and Mr. Kellett, who both witnessed it."

Dispassionately, as though she were giving me a routine rundown on the weather, she told about the disappearance of *Cupid's Arrow*. She turned to them. "Can you add anything to that?"

"You've covered it," said Dan, obviously impressed. "Every bit of it."

"Except for one thing, Mrs. Endi-

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cott," Rhoda put in hesitantly. "There — there was no *sound.* It — well, it just melted, and there was nothing *left.*"

There was a touch of hysteria in her voice, and Laure Endicott soothed her expertly. "Rhoda," she said, "that's why I'm sure it didn't simply melt or anything like that. It couldn't have, not without a trace. It was, if anything, *transferred,* sent somewhere else. We'll have to try to find out where and how."

Almost in an instant, I had experienced utter shock, cold realization, and half-acceptance of the unbelievable.

She leaned toward us. "In the meantime we've other fish to fry. Before too long, one of Dan's boys is going to realize that *Cupid's Arrow's* disappeared, and once the word's out the whole yard will be swarming — local police, federal men, then the media and God only knows who else following. Geoff, what do you think we ought to do?"

I hesitated, juggling choices. "I think our best bet's a cover-up — at least for now. That may give us a chance to find what happened. Otherwise, government—" We exchanged glances, thinking of the people who had come to power in Washington. "Otherwise, they'll really make a mess of things, and we'll have nothing left to get our teeth into."

She sat back, smiling grimly now. "I was hoping you'd say that." Dan Kellett here tells me both the ship's hawsers were cut off razor clean. Could we give their ends a quick laser burn to hide the fact?"

"No reason why not, if no one sees us."

"I can manage it if we can keep our own men off my back," Dan told her. He stood up massively. "It's lucky Saul wouldn't stand for any automatic security devices when there was anyone aboard. If he had, the fat'd be in the fire. Right, Commander?"

"Right, Dan."

He took his intercom out of his pocket and called two men I knew would be nearest.

"Sousa! Myers! Kellett here at the office. From the window it looks like maybe there's steam or smoke out near the end of the north slip. Probably nothing, but better chase on up and check it out."

We waited till they got back to him that they were on the way. Then, quickly and quietly, he left the room. I looked inquiringly at Laure Endicott.

"You're wondering why I'm so anxious to make things look as though the boat's been stolen?" She smiled. "Partly, Geoff, it's because of the people we'll be dealing with. But there's something else. Saul told me about a week ago that he'd accomplished something sensational — a major breakthrough. He halfway hinted at a preview — he called it a *première.* The only other people present were to be his daughter, and his Chinese girl friend, that pretty Lillian Yee, and you, and Franz Andra-

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di because after all he did a lot of work on it with Saul. I don't want the powers that be even to suspect that there might be more involved than some minor improvement in the drive or power plant — and, Geoff, there *was*."

We sat there looking at each other silently, hoping Dan wouldn't be too long with his "Mission accomplished!"

He wasn't. It took him eight minutes by the clock. Finally his voice came back to us. "Commander Cormac? Looks like it's time for me to button up. I've a dinner date, but I'll come back and make a quick check around midnight."

Our intercoms were scrambled but Dan was spooked. Well, so was I. "Good boy," I told him, playing right along. "See you tomorrow."

We looked at each other, Laure Endicott and I. "Well," I said, "now the shooting starts. We'll just have to face up to whatever weirdos our new government sends down to bug us."

Rhoda was crying very softly — beautiful, loyal, dedicated Rhoda. She had a worthless brother, Arley, estranged except when he came begging her for money; and a grandmother, an inoffensive, ineffectual semi-alcoholic living in a protected retirement complex, whom Rhoda visited sadly and dutifully. None of us realized how dreadfully vulnerable she was going to be because of them. Laure Endicott and Dan were the only real family Rhoda had. I went and patted her on the shoulder. "I'm glad the admiral didn't see these so-called Individualists take power," I said. "He really *was* an individualist — and these apes are against everything he stood for."

His widow nodded. "He recognized them immediately for what they were. 'Their individualism,' he told me, 'means only that everyone's free to be like every other individual — and they'll define *that*. When they talk about private enterprise, they simply mean you're free to buy a share or two in one of the great conglomerates — but if you succeed by yourself you're a public menace. Like me.' "

She did not allow her bitterness to affect her voice. The admiral had been relentless in his opposition to the Individualist People's Party, in his cutting denunciations of their heavily funded charismatic leader, Breck Duggan — Good Ol' Breck — and their entire program. Both she and I felt that when his private plane slammed into the Cascades, killing him and his copilot, there'd been dirty work afoot. But there was no way to prove it, and anyway, by that time IPP influence had grown to the point where they could have hamstrung us. Since then, they had swept the country. Good Ol' Breck was now our president, and his movement was spreading into other countries, south of the border, through what remained of the British Commonwealth, even behind the Iron Curtain, where Marxist ideologues had found a spiritual kinship between their repressive collectivism and his own — it re-

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minded me of the Hitler-Stalin pact at the start of World War II. The death rate among independent industries had soared, and so far Underseas had survived only because Laure Endicott seemed to know even more than the Japanese about economically building first-class cargo submarines.

Rhoda dried her eyes. "Hadn't I better be going home, Mrs. Endicott?" she said.

Laure Endicott stood up. "Please don't," she answered. "I need you both. I'm going to take you out to dinner, somewhere where we can't be found too easily. Geoffrey, why don't you phone Janet and see if she can join us at — let's see — how about Les Trois Mousquetaires? Rhoda can go and freshen up while you're phoning."

Rhoda looked at her gratefully, and went out, and I reached for the phone, but Laure stopped me. "A moment, Geoffrey! Rhoda and Dan Kellett can go together. You can ride with me because I want to talk to you. I want to brief you on some things you don't know — about Saul and *Cupid's Arrow*. Janet can drive you home after dinner — and you'll probably either find the phone ringing for you when you get there, or else one of our people waiting to rush you to the yard."

I called Janet at the hospital, and waited while they had her paged. We'd been planning to have dinner out together anyhow, and she was delighted to go to a restaurant that was so quietly famous, and she'd meet us there.

Laure was a good driver. We left the yard behind us, and she turned her swift, silent car onto the access road leading to the freeway and the city.

"Geoffrey," she said, "have you ever wondered exactly what we've been paying Saul Gilpin for? Of course, it was to develop better and cheaper ways of doing things, but that wasn't all by any means. John never believed that very profitable myth that only corporate or university or government-owned think tanks can come up with anything original — that everything's become too complex for the individual genius who just can't or won't fit into a think-tank slot. Years ago, he said, 'Someday Saul's going to come up with something really revolutionary, something the whole world's been waiting for without knowing it. My money's on him.' Geoffrey, Saul was working on a new drive."

"I knew that," I said, "but I just assumed he'd worked out a new way of converting the nukepak's energy to electricity. Maybe he wasn't a mad scientist, Laure, but he really played the part — living aboard *Cupid's Arrow*, actually setting up housekeeping there the last few months, bragging to everybody that he was working on the world's fastest sub. It was just lucky that sub-killers have made submarines so vulnerable that they're militarily worthless — otherwise, the government would have plucked him out of here long ago."

"Lucky for him — and us. His new

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drive wasn't as simple as he made it sound. It was based on concepts that, quite literally, nobody else could understand. Franz Andradi told me he couldn't, even though he's a nuclear engineer. Once I asked Saul to explain it to me, and he replied, *'Chère madame,* I would be delighted to, but no — there is no way. It echoes the poetry at the heart of process, that's what it does! But I promise you — it will succeed! Indeed it will, and then you can throw the greatest party of all time to celebrate, even if I'm no longer there.' Then he bowed, and walked off chuckling to himself."

I was beginning to catch on; a new and even more disquieting dimension was being added to the vanishing of *Cupid's Arrow.*

"Do you mean," I asked, "that Saul's new drive did more than just *drive?* That it shifted *Cupid's Arrow* into — into — oh, hell! — into a different universe or something?"

"Or something," she replied. "Yes. And that's why I'll do anything — and I mean *anything* — to keep Good Ol' Breck and his people from finding out about it."

"What about Saul?"

"He must've been aboard — he and his cute Lillian Yee, and probably Polly Esther, too. He'd never have let himself get left behind in that kind of an experiment. And he wouldn't have gone off without them."

"Do you suppose that's what he meant when he talked of celebrating even if he were no longer present?"

"Probably. God only knows where they are now. They may no longer even exist. Anyhow, I intend to find out what happened. Are you with me, Geoff?"

"All the way," I told her.

"And Dan Kellett?"

"He feels the way I do — about you and about the IPP. What about Franz? How much *does* he know?"

Momentarily, she smiled. "Probably more than we do. By an odd coincidence, he went off backpacking in Montana — at least ten days, he said, up in the high country where no telephone can reach him."

The freeway crossed the river, and we looked down on the city turning on its lights, and I found myself wondering what was going to happen to it under Duggan's rule.

"Thank God," I said, "that some of the creeps Good Ol' Breck's appointed to high office aren't too bright. Still, we'd better cover all bases."

"Do you remember how John used to put it? 'The first contingency plans you make are for when somebody sinks your unsinkable ship.' "

"Well, let's suppose we can keep them hoodwinked," I asked. "Then how do *we* go about finding out what and how?"

"I'll know more after we talk with Franz," she told me. "Right now I haven't even a shred of an idea."

"Didn't you keep copies of Saul's records — you know, equations, dia-

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grams, blueprints, parts lists, all that sort of thing?"

"Geoffrey, Saul didn't work that way. He never offered them. I never asked for them. We'll have to depend on what Franz can tell us when he gets back. At this stage, maybe it's just as well. There literally isn't anything for anyone to find."

That I couldn't argue with.

As we wound down into the city, she told me what immediate action she was going to take. "We both know how the Individualist People's party operates," she said. "Their goons used terrorist tactics and KGB tactics, the whole immoral arsenal, during their drive to power and in their interparty rivalries, but we can't waste energy getting scared. We'll go on the offensive. We'll report it to the local police immediately, and to the state and federal agencies. We'll blame it on industrial espionage and sabotage. We'll scream to all the media — theft of our super-submarine, possible kidnapping of its inventor and his daughter! We'll raise the roof and keep on raising it. Of course, they'll have the Coast Guard and the Navy out, but when they don't find *Cupid's Arrow* they'll simply think she slipped away. Only sub-killers would be dead certain, and even *they* wouldn't dare to use those — not in peacetime, and with all the international traffic."

"Okay," I said, grinning at her. "The minute the yard gets in touch we'll get to work."

II

Laure was one of those rare, wonderful people who not only can relax and enjoy themselves even when they know the world may fall in on them tomorrow, but who can transmit the feeling to those around them. All through dinner, she kept anxiety at bay, soothing Rhoda, gradually teasing out my own worry lines, carefully briefing Janet on what had happened without alarming her. Of course, the fact that it was a splendid dinner, superbly served, did no harm; and when finally, at about ten-thirty, we went our separate ways, knowing we'd see each other again in less than half an hour, we were actually lighthearted.

It didn't last. As Janet and I drove up to our apartment, we saw the company car waiting at the entrance. It was Sousa, who'd been trying to phone me all evening. He'd figured we'd gone off someplace, but took the chance we'd come on home. Somebody had stolen *Cupid's Arrow*—

I made appropriate noises of shocked disbelief, and he blurted out what they had found. What with Saul living right aboard with a phone and his own kinky alarm system, they hadn't bothered to check on the small subs for nearly an hour after they came back from the North Slip — and then — well, the ship was *gone*. They'd called in to the office and told Ordway, who was in charge with Kellett gone, and

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he'd told them not to disturb anything and to get in touch right away with Mrs. Endicott or me.

"Come up to the apartment," I told him. "We've got to call the cops."

We hurried. I got through to city police harbor detail — and found that Laure had phoned them a few minutes before and they were on their way. She hadn't had as far to drive as we. So then I called the feds, and some nasty bastard — a new IPP appointee by the sound of him — told me Laure had called them, too, and I'd better get my butt down to the yard on the double, and what kind of amateur job were we doing down there anyhow, letting somebody steal a friggin' submarine?

I gave him a soft answer, and took off after Sousa. When we roared in past the gate guard, I saw nothing but police cars, sheriffs' cars, federal cars, and lots of media cars, with everyone snorting around and shouting orders. I pushed through to Laure's office, and found a couple of the new federal boys trying to browbeat her and getting absolutely nowhere. I looked them over, and decided that their qualifying experience must've been either as jail guards or inmates. They seemed to figure they had the problem solved: Was Underseas, Ltd., having money problems? And was this weird sub insured? And for how much? And how about the Gilpin guy, was he aboard? And who stood to collect *his* insurance?

Laure was playing with them, giving them deliberately evasive answers, getting them more and more fouled up in their own confusion, and generally managing things so they'd believe what'd be best for us, so I went down into the yard again and got Dan alone for a moment. "How's it going?" I asked.

"Fine! They've been stomping around over absolutely everything, even each other. Believe me, if I left any evidence when I used the laser — by the way, I took care to leave a few burns on the pier — it's either gone by now or so kicked around it's meaningless."

"Let's hope so!"

"There's one guy worries me." He frowned. "A brick outhouse sort of character named Whalen Borg. He's not running with the pack, and he's got a look on him like he's out to burn a heretic." He saw the expression on my face. "Know anything about him?"

"Too much. He's a displaced ayatollah. But not stupid — no way. While he was working for the party his business *was* burning heretics — or at least working them over pretty nastily. And that's not the worst. I knew him in the service. They found him pulling rough stuff on enlisted men — and women — and it was the admiral who brought charges and made them stick, but strings were pulled and he ended up out on a psychiatric discharge. He'll have forgotten none of it, and he'll be remembering that I testi-

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fied against him, too. And now he's a fed?"

"Buzzer and everything. He doesn't act like he's in charge, but also he doesn't act as if anyone's in charge of him. And he's been asking the wrong questions."

"Such as—"

"Such as what kind of drive was Saul working on? And how come he was getting such special treatment? And when could his records be made available for inspection?"

"Dan, Borg changes the whole picture. He's a personal enemy — not just of mine, but of Mrs. Endicott's because she's the admiral's widow. From now on, we can't forget him for a moment, especially if things quiet down and he seems to fade into the background. It could be we'll have to fight a little private war, and if we do there won't be any rules. Catch on?"

He nodded, so I gave him a slap on the back and went up to Laure's office again. Now she had even more company — media people, agents, cops — all milling around while the agent in charge, another new appointee, sounded off about how he had the whole case in the bag. He was a gangling, schoolteacherish sort of man with an abrasive sideshow barker's voice, and he was promising the media the greatest story of the year. Of course, he had to keep it under wraps until he'd had everything checked out, but they could go ahead and tell the world that it was significant — *most* significant — that this Saul Gilpin's girl friend was *Chinese*. And they could also say that neither he nor the administration took any stock in Mrs. Endicott's accusation that perhaps one of the major conglomerates had stolen the submarine. Now possibly some other irresponsible small entrepreneur.... He left the suggestion hanging for the media people to bite at; and Laure Endicott, ignoring him, smiled at them regally.

Then, in the opposite corner of the room, I saw Whalen Borg staring at me. He was enormous — almost grotesquely so because to match his chest and shoulders he should have been a foot and a half taller. His thinning hair was combed very carefully across his tub-shaped head. His round, colorless, cold eyes protruded slightly, drawing attention from his undistinguished, heavy face. He stared at me, smiling very slightly, and I stared through him for a moment before I let my glance drift on.

A few minutes later, it was over. The agent in charge dismissed the media; he herded his own people through the door; he didn't even bother to say good night. And Whalen Borg, never taking his eyes off me, was the last to leave. The first late, late newscasts were telling all about it — the suspected Chinese involvement, and how Saul Gilpin had a record of mental instability, and how taxpayers' money was being wasted on an unimportant incident which could never have occured at a conglomerate yard.

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On the surface all was going well. There was only that one fly in the ointment, and I didn't need to point it out. Laure had seen him, too.

The next two weeks were raucous. Individualist People's Party senators and congressmen shouted about the danger of letting "fly-by-night speculators" play games with industries vital to the economy; they demanded investigations; they introduced bills which — even though destined to die quickly in committee — showed clearly what the future held in store for us once both Houses were purged of our last friends. The media, of course, yelled just as loudly. *Cupid's Arrow* could not be found? Their inside information said she'd been destroyed — again for insurance — or gobbled up whole by a huge Chinese naval cargo sub like Jonah in the whale, or (God help me!) stolen by Saul Gilpin for a protracted sex orgy with his girl friend *and* his daughter.

The cops kept pestering us, always with the same questions, the same innuendos; and we kept on giving them the same answers, very patiently. Whalen Borg, to my surprise, didn't show up again — and that alarmed me more than the rest of it. It was a dead certainty — that he was watching, planning, waiting. Of course, we kept on shouting to the media about our stolen submarine, but I knew Borg didn't believe that it was stolen, though the rest of them swallowed the story, hook, line, and sinker.

Then suddenly all the fuss died away. The party noisemakers found new issues to panic their constituents. The media found new targets to attack. And I redoubled our precautions.

Franz Andradi came back from his vacation a few days later. He checked in at the office, and it was obvious that Saul's disappearance had been no surprise to him; but we didn't want to start questioning him, not then. The admiral had sponsored his parents years before when they had emigrated, and he and the Endicotts had been close friends ever since. He was dark and lithe and wild, looking more like a Hungarian hussar than a nuclear engineer, and where the ladies were concerned he made the most of it. But generally men liked him; he played fair. We had hired him with only his M.S., and he had worked for us for a little more than a year, mostly with Saul but sometimes on more conventional projects.

It wasn't until all three of us were in Laure's car on the way to lunch that Franz began to talk about it. Saul had tipped him off, had told him to get out of town and stay out until the flap subsided. He promised him that, yes indeed, there was going to be a flap — a simply lovely flap — and that when Franz heard about it he'd know exactly what had happened, even if he didn't understand exactly how. Franz had trusted Saul implicitly, guessing that

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whatever he was planning was in the best interest of us all. Now Franz looked at Laure apologetically to see if she was offended at having been left out of it.

She wasn't. She simply nodded. "And what *did* happen, Franz? What, exactly, did Saul's invention do?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm a nuclear engineer — not a theoretical physicist," he answered; and I saw that now his jauntiness had vanished, and he was deadly serious. "Even if I were, I probably wouldn't understand it, Mrs. Endicott. He told me that it was a drive — and, knowing Saul, I'm sure that's what it is. But I've never seen it driving anything. It occupies a space only about five feet by three by maybe two, and it can swallow all the energy the ship's nukepak puts out without even warming up. Once or twice Saul let me watch it when he turned it on — watch the instruments measuring its appetite. The readings were unbelievable. Then he always turned it off — Before it scares you,' he said. That's about all I can tell you at first hand. He wouldn't tell me any more — all he needed me for was for modifications to the nukepak and its controls. The last time we talked about it, he twiddled that absurd moustache of his and reached up and tweaked my ear, and said, 'Franz, laddie, by and by you'll find out a lot more. Just be sure you're back right after the flap's over, in time for Laure's birthday. Tell her you are invited to her party — that *I* invited you — and have a dozen of her drinks for me.' Then he went off, chuckling to himself and whistling *Marlbrough s'en va t'en guerre.*"

"Is that *all* he ever told you?" I asked.

"Not quite, Geoff," he answered, almost reluctantly. "It's — well, it's hard for me to believe it even now. What he said — as nearly as I can remember — was, 'Franz, this is the most efficient, most powerful drive anyone ever made. There's just one trouble with it. It can't be used in ordinary space, in space-as-we-know-it. But in its own space — ha! that's a white horse of a different color. Why, in such a space it'd be swift as thought!' I answered him with some wisecrack about how much did he intend to speed up his stupid submarine anyway? Then he raised a hand to heaven and swore he'd never tell me because I was jealous of his magnificent moustache." Franz stroked his own coal-black redundancy, grinning a little ruefully. "And all the time I thought he was just kidding me?" He paused. "Okay," he said, "just how did *Cupid's Arrow* disappear? Did it get shifted out of phase with here and now? Did it get thrown into a science fiction universe? Whatever did Saul do with it?"

We told him exactly what Dan and Rhoda had told us, and he asked us to repeat it.

Then the three of us were silent for half a mile, all of us thinking the same thoughts. Laure and I had learned no

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more than we'd already guessed, but now we *knew*. What *had* really happened? And where were Saul and his Lillian and his daughter now?

"Saul used words very strangely sometimes," Laure said finally, "but he wasn't one to waste them. His mentioning my birthday and my party couldn't have been accidental." She frowned. "Franz, my birthday's only three days off, and I want you to fly down and spend those days with that girl of yours at Stanford, the one who's silly enough to take you seriously. It'll seem more plausible, and you can still be back in plenty of time."

"And Franz," I added, "watch out for dark alleys and strange women."

He grinned. "Don't worry, Geoff. Dark alleys don't appeal to me, and the women I already know aren't strange at all."

III

Laure Endicott's birthday parties had started while the admiral was still living, and they had always been small family affairs — Janet and I; Saul and his Polly Esther and, later, Lillian; Rhoda and her husband until he died, and finally Rhoda and Dan Kellett. Then, of course, there was always Mrs. Rasmussen, who'd been with the Endicott's for twenty or more years, and who was family as much as anyone. It was she who served the dinner, which was invariably a triumph, sometimes calling in her daughter to assist her, but more often than not doing it all alone.

She had been very fond of Saul and of his Polly Esther, and at first the shock of his disappearance had depressed her, but she was cheerful now, and the party, which could have turned into the sadder sort of wake, became a celebration. But then she knew something we didn't know.

We found out right after dinner, after Laure had blown out the candles and the cake had been cut and served. First knocking on the door — which got our attention instantly because it was something she didn't have to do — Mrs. Rasmussen came back into the dining room, and this time she was not alone. With her there was a Boy Scout, a very young one in full uniform, neat and clean and freshly pressed, his blond hair falling down over his forehead. He was carrying a flat package wrapped in fancy paper, with a big ornate bow at either end, and he was obviously embarrassed. Seeing us there, he hesitated, blushing, shuffling his feet.

"You know my grandson, Keithy," Mrs. Rasmussen spoke with a lilting Danish accent. "He's got a message for you, Mrs. Endicott." She urged him forward. "And doesn't he look nice? Just like in Norman Rockwell's pictures. And look at those merit badges — and him only into scouting for a year already! Now come on, Keithy, you keep your promise."

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Keithy blushed even redder than before. Then, squaring his shoulders, his eyes closed tight, he sand, *"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday, dear Auntie, Happy Birthday to you!"*

He opened his eyes again, and looked at Laure apprehensively. "That 'Auntie' wasn't mine, Mrs. Endicott," he blurted. "That was Uncle Saul's! He told me to sing it just like that, and then to give you this." He came forward, holding out the package. "He made me promise I'd never tell about it, not to anybody, and I promised him, scout's honor!"

Smiling, Laure took the package. "Thank you, Keith. Nobody ever called me Auntie except Mr. Gilpin, so you did exactly right. Would you like a piece of birthday cake?"

She placed a generous slice on a cake plate. "Sit here next to me," she said.

I'm sorry, Mrs. Endicott," his grandmother put in. "That wasn't the way Mr. Gilpin wanted it. He said Keithy could have a great big slice of cake, just like the one you cut, but he was to have it with me in the kitchen, because what's in that package is a big secret. Isn't that right, Keithy?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's what he said, and I won't tell anybody that, either. Happy Birthday, Mrs. Endicott."

Laure thanked him once again, and no one said a word until the door had closed behind them. In a whisper, Franz Andradi said, "I hope your present's what I think it is!"

Carefully, patiently, Laure took out an envelope half-hidden by a bow. She opened it. She took out an enormous birthday card. There was a folded letter in it, but first she showed the card to all of us, a horribly sentimental thing featuring pink bunnies peeking out from behind enormous mushrooms. When we had all had a chance to smile over it, she unfolded the letter.

Mi chère Matante, (she read aloud)

Didn't know I could speak Liègeois, now did you? Admit it! Admit you didn't know! Nor did any of those other nice people at your table. Well, there's a whole lot they don't know about their Uncle Saul — not *your* uncle, Auntie Laure. And anyhow, you're probably all sitting there mad at me because I stole your little submarine, and you're wondering what's become of me and Lillian and Polly Esther. Well, I'm sure we're going to be all right because I've made all sorts of preparations for a long, long journey. And don't you ladies sit there worrying about Polly Esther, because her boy friend, a nice sort of engineering character from Cal. Tech., is with us, and now I'm the captain of the ship I'll marry them myself.

I'm guilty. I did steal *Cupid's Arrow.* But dear Aunt Laure, like a good pack rat I've left you something in place of it. Can you guess? Of course you can't, though I sup-

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pose Franz has been doing his damnedest.

What have I left you?

Madame, I have left you a hot potato. I have left you a ticket to the stars. And to you, and you, and you, and you and you, and you too, I leave

My love,

Saul Gilpin
Captain, Starship
Cupid's Arrow

PS: You now have full instructions, in words and drawings any intelligent child can understand, as to how to build it. If you follow them, you will find out what it is. It will not shift you into another Universe, because God made only this one (or so He told me). But He made it with an infinite number of states or aspects. Into one of these my device will plunge you. The silly rules of physics as we know them will not apply to you. When the device is in its drive modes — it has others — you will not have to suffer the torments of acceleration. You will not, in your journeyings, have to wait on sluggard light.

God love you, gentles all!

(signed again) Gentle Saul

PPS: Now don't forget — I want you to start building right away, before the IPP devours you. However, to make that a bit less likely, I have already built you one extra drive, complete with its computers and controls. Follow directions and your starships will be set to go. And, dear hearts, *keep* it that way. Provision it. Put aboard everything I've thought of and anything else you can find room for. You may have to take off as fast as I did.

Laure put the letter down. What does one say when a door too vast, a door always safely welded shut, is suddenly thrown wide to show the absolutely uunbelievable? In a very low voice, finally, she spoke. "If what Saul tells us here is true, and I'm sure it is, perhaps his hot potato will prove too hot to handle. Only science fiction writers, only a very few far-out scientists, have dared to dream of starflight as actually attainable, and even they have thought in terms of decades, of centuries, for research, of uncounted billions for development. Now suddenly *we* are given it — simple, cheap, instantly available. Our world's a bomb — a bomb with as many fuses as there are crazy little nations, as many as our savage dictators, our corrupt politicians, our power-hungry plotters, manipulators, terrorists! How would these people see our starship? As weapons only, a secret to be seized at any cost. But there'd be many, many others who'd look on us as saviors, helping them escape the dread they live with to face less certain perils. Very well, what shall we do with it?"

"My God!" Dan said, more to himself than to the rest of us. "My God! Brought to us by a Boy Scout!"

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"There's one thing Saul didn't mention," Franz put in. "Just *where's* that extra drive he said he's made?"

Laure smiled at him. "Perhaps another Boy Scout will come along with it."

She undid the package, rolled its ribbon neatly, took out three fat manila envelopes. One was addressed to her, one to Franz, and one to me.

"What shall we do with it?" she asked again.

I thought of what would happen if it fell into the hands of Good Ol' Breck and those even darker figures who pulled his strings, or of the grim old men inside the Kremlin.

Everyone, I think, spoke at once, saying the same thing in different ways; and Laure listened till we had finished.

"We are agreed, then? *They* mustn't have it?"

I spoke for all of us. "We're all agreed. Nothing we've learned tonight will be told to anyone not now in this room."

Coolly, penetratingly, Laure regarded all their faces. "I'm satisfied of that. But still we must decide what use we'll make of it. Let's all consider it, knowing that we will have to plan swiftly, and act more swiftly still." Astoundingly, she smiled. "And let us pray that what we do is right. And let us pray for Saul and Lillian, and Polly Esther and her lad, whoever he may be, and for *Cupid's Arrow*. And now — let's have some birthday cake. Then we'll have coffee and liqueurs."

Thus she shunted us back into reality — a reality now seemed all the more unreal, with its birthday icing of affection and friendship and festivity. We ate our cake, and sipped our demitasses and savored our liqueurs, realizing that what had overwhelmed us was much too dangerous — yes, and much too sacred — to be discussed even among ourselves, not then. Only Franz had been unable to conform. He picked up his liqueur and, muttering an apology, retreated to a corner of the room to open his envelope. I could see him from my place at the table, the changing expression on his face mirroring amazement, disbelief, grudging acceptance, puzzled annoyance, wonderment. He was oblivious to everything and everyone around him. Once in a while, he would make small grumbling noises, or gasp astonishment.

The rest of us went on with our charade for half an hour, an hour, until the time came to break up the party. Dan and Rhoda were the first to leave, and Laure walked them to the door. I could tell that Janet was just waiting for me to give the word, but before I could, Laure asked her if she'd mind going to the kitchen and saying a word or two to Mrs. Rasmussen and Keith. "They're very fond of you," she told her, smiling.

Then, with Janet gone, she turned to me. "Geoffrey, we're going to have to act as rapidly as possible. I mean decisions." She called to Franz, jarring him out of his other-world

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of physics. "Franz, how does it look to you? Have you any idea how it works?"

Franz came over to sit down next to us. "How does it work? Mrs. Endicott, I have *no* idea. If I hadn't seen Saul's tests and heard how *Cupid's Arrow* dissolved before God and everyone — well, I would've said Saul had flipped, that he simply had concocted a topologist's nightmare of a nothing-gadget. It has metal elements; it has ceramic elements; it has what look like massive, twisted monofilaments going nowhere; it seems to have no moving parts, though there are some that look as though they *could* move if they wanted to. Yet everything in it is made of common stuff, stuff easily found and easily fabricated. It has me stumped. I have no takeoff point. *None*. But Saul is right. Each part, if it's subcontracted, looks as if it could be part of almost anything — a paper mill, a cotton gin, you name it. And every unit, following his directions, shouldn't cost more than in the low six figures. That's only a quick guess, of course, but I'd bet I'm not too far off. The computer equipment would be extra."

"Who do you think should get it?" Laure asked, addressing both of us.

"We should," I told her. "But how could we protect it?"

"The whole world should," Franz said. "That's the safest way."

"You're both right," she answered. "We ought to have it because Saul produced it for us, but there would be no way for us to keep it secret, even if we died trying — which I suspect we would. And the whole world should have it, because the whole world needs it desperately, and we could sell it to them — except that we'd not be allowed to. Therefore there's only one thing we *can* do—" She broke off, questioning us with her eyes. "We can give it to the world, for free, but not until we ourselves have built one, and tested it, and can safely say, 'This is our gift to you. It will take you to new worlds. It will dash you into undreamed-of dangers. But it will never injure you itself.' Perhaps we can keep it secret long enough for that."

I nodded. She was right. I could see that Franz was also in agreement. He said, "Yes. If you were to publish it — or even try to publish it — just as it stands, you'd be destroyed, and Lord only knows what'd become of it."

Laure reached out to us. She put one hand over one of mine, and one on his. "Our time is short. The election is only two months off, and it will give them both Houses of the Congress. Their power will be absolute, and it'll be too late for us. Tomorrow I'll announce that I am giving up competing where major vessels are concerned, that Underseas is going to stick to small special-purpose craft. I'll tell the media I know when I'm licked. I'll even hint that eventually I may sell out completely. It'll be plausible — I'll really scream my outrage at what's been done to us. It'll

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be a cover-up for new activities and changes around the yard. The first order of business, naturally, will be to find that drive and get it installed aboard either *Owl* or *Pussycat*. That'll be pretty much up to Franz. But he's also going to have to recruit one or two helpers who won't be frightened by the thought of starships. We'll need steady, solid men — and women — but with imagination, the kind of people who'd have jumped at the chance to sail to the Indies with Columbus, or round the world with Drake, or down into the sea's dark depths with Captain Nemo. You'll find lots of them who are already interested — members of the L-15 Society, for example. I doubt if we'll ever be able to set up actual manufacturing ourselves, but if there's time we'll try. But we're going to be busy, busy, busy from now on."

IV

We took Franz Andradi home with us, more so that he and I could have a chance to talk than anything else. I could see that he wasn't quite his usual effervescent self, and when we'd settled down over a round of drinks it all came spilling out. Hadn't Saul been taking a hell of a chance, making all those copies and passing them around like that? And where the hell *had* he hidden the extra drive? And now that we'd had a chance to think about it, weren't we really taking on a terrible responsibility, making the decision to turn the human race loose on the Galaxy — to say nothing of the dangers to the race itself?

"Saul," I told him, "isn't an undercover, Frederick Forsyth type. Though he's supposed to have had a high clearance somewhere along the line, he isn't even what you could call a security type. He's eccentric, to put it mildly. But we must admit he's not done too badly up to now. Would you have thought up that pretty little caper with the Boy Scout? Would I? We'll protect our copies. Perhaps Laure's and mine can be reduced to microdots, but you'll need yours to work with. We'll see tomorrow. Anyhow—" I grinned as cheerfully as I could, "—we still aren't helpless. The Big Purge won't come till the next election. There's only one thing that really worries me—"

Then I told him about Whalen Borg. "Right now, we don't really know how much clout he has, or what facilities. I'm going to see what I can learn from Garvey, in NavIntel — after all, he just about owes the admiral his career."

Janet, tired now, made us another round and said good-night, telling me not to be too long.

"And what about the destiny of the human race?" Franz asked. "Are we the people to decide?" He grinned, twisting his moustache savagely. "Naturally, *I'm* sure we are but some folks might wonder."

"What has the race done to its des-

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tiny already?" I asked. "Breeding itself out of existance, eating itself out of existance, bleeding the precious earth that nourished it, burning up irreplaceable metals, minerals, petrochemicals, fouling the air, fouling the lakes and seas? And if we don't make the decision, now that we have the power, who *will?* Good Ol' Breck and his puppeteers? The executioners in the Kremlin? Some hideous murdering little dictator in what Eleanor Roosevelt would have called an *emerging* country, sucking up both sides for weaponry?"

" 'Ear! 'Ear!" Franz cried, exuberant again.

"And as for the perils of the planets, and the dangers of vasty space — well, they shouldn't deter us any more than the dangers of the deep deterred those Chinese navigators who crossed over to the coast of South America, or the Vikings who made their icy way to Vinland, or St. Brendan in his boat of skins. They too faced the unknown — unknown lands, unknown seas and spaces, unknown beings, unknown diseases. And they didn't have instant computer analysis of any and every antagonistic chemical and hostile organism. Nor did they have computer-enhanced syntheses of almost instant agents to counter any one of them. Back in the eighties, I'd have said *no* myself. But not now. The human race has the right to risk its lives, the right to venture freely, the right to escape the suicide of the world!"

"You should've been half-Magyar, just like me!" cried Franz admiringly "I drink to you. Perhaps we can make you an honorary one."

"That would be nice," I told him; and a few minutes later I saw him off to bed, thinking that at least I had been able to cheer *him* up a little bit.

I myself was by no means as certain as I had sounded. I sat down and poured myself a double brandy. I had been Navy all my adult life — never doubting where my duty lay. And yet — the Constitution of the United States — that Constitution I had sworn to defend against all enemies domestic and foreign — was already almost a dead letter; after the next election it would have no more weight or substance than a pricked balloon. And yet — I sat there, wondering how many Reichswehr officers had thought such thoughts when Hitler first took power, how many Austrian officers had thought them at the *Anschluss.* I picked up the envelope Saul had marked for me.

At the very top was a letter addressed, in Saul's erratic hand to *Commodore Cormac.* I opened it.

Dear Commodore, (he had written)

I know you're not a commodore, and *you* know you're not a commodore, because the Navy hasn't had the sense to retain that splendid, picturesque, historic rank. But I will confer the title on you because I love you — (fraternally, in case some nasty-minded busybody should see this letter).

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Very well, beloved brother, if you're doing what I strongly suspect you are, wrestling with your commodorish (commodorian?) conscience, let Gentle Saul offer you good advice:

Don't.

Geoff, I have made enough copies of my work to ensure that it will eventually be disseminated to the entire world whether Laure publishes or not. So giving a set to You-know-who would only do our poor old world much harm. All *they* will see in my device will be a superweapon, and if they had the wit and will and decency to use it decisively to set up a civilized world order — if, instead of Good Ol' Breck, they were Winston Churchill or even Napoleon Bonaparte — then I myself would give it to them with my blessings.

But, Geoff, they aren't. It would be the "secret of the atom bomb" all over again — only how much worse?

I know what Franz believes. I'm sure that Auntie Laure agrees with him and me. And I'm betting that you will, too. So here's your set of plans for Gilpin's Galactic Star-Drive.

Lovingly,
Saul

PS. I've sold Franz my old Dodge van, but he doesn't know it yet. It's in its usual spot back of the machine shop, where you untidy people keep things like broken-down forklifts. The papers are all dated six weeks ago, and he's just been too busy to change the registration, in case anybody asks. I told Keithy to leave them with Mrs. Rasmussen — also the keys.

I frowned, puzzled. Saul was bound to do things in a Saulish way, but—

Then, abruptly, I understood, and I knew where we would find the extra drive Saul had made for us.

I put Saul's papers back into their envelope — I wouldn't have understood them anyway — and for another half-hour I sat there weighing and balancing the odds. Even if we could keep it secret, the elections would be our absolute cutoff date, with perhaps a breathless week or two afterwards — the time the IPP might need to make sure all heads had rolled. Meanwhile, we still could count on friends — patriotic and powerful friends — both in the Pentagon and in the Congress. We probably could still count, if not on the friendship, at least on the dispassionate honesty of some of the high courts. If our luck held.

When Janet, who had been wakeful waiting for me, came in and told me that I was much too tired to think, I kissed her and let her lead me off to bed; and, when I tried to tell her what was in my mind, she shushed me with a finger on my lips, and smiled, and I realized that she knew as well as I. Just before

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she turned out the light, she gave me an envelope and two keys on a ring. "From Mrs. Rasmussen," she told me. "She seemed to think you'd be expecting them."

I drove Franz down to the yard after an early breakfast during which I broke the news to him about the van. It was a lovely day, cool and clear, unsullied by smog and with the fresh smell of the sea in the air. On the way to the parking lot, we glanced at *Owl* and *Pussycat*, now almost ready for their sea-trials, moored securely to their pier with only the eerie pace where *Cupid's Arrow* had once been between them. All three had been designed for maritime archaeology and salvage, for not-too-deep exploration, for search and rescue, but though basically they were sister-ships, each had her minor variations. *Owl* was conspicuous for her manipulators — great lobster claw-like servos with which she could cut into steel deck-plating or tear an ancient oaken hull apart to pilfer a single coin from whatever treasure she contained. They fascinated Dan Kellett, who several times had asked permission to try them out, and had always come ashore grinning happily and saying they made him feel like a super sea monster. *Owl* also had pressure hatches which could give birth to armored divers and draw them in again. With more observation ports in her ship-wide control tower than either of her sisters, she was a many-eyed creature which could see everything, around, before, behind.

Now I saw her, not on the ocean floor but on the strange surface of an unknown world, extruding instruments to test its atmosphere, fingers to seize its life-forms for examination — those who didn't seem too likely to seize back, and finally men to prove its hospitality or enmity. I saw her swimming, swift and solitary, in deep space, the stars instead of starfish in her eyes.

That was when I first understood that, inevitably, some of us were going to become astronauts — true *astro*-nauts. To Franz I said, "We're going to have to start picking crews — one to start with. Probably for *Owl*."

"*Owl* looks like the better bet," he answered; and I knew that the same thoughts had been running through his mind. "I'd say Tammy Uemrua for a starter, definitely. I've been drinking with him and playing go and chess with him for a year, so I know how he thinks — and his wife, too, which is something else to think about. Then there's Jamie Macartney, but we'd have to get him back from Ireland. He's as solid as Tammy, and he's a genius at planning for the unexpected."

"Which is something we're really liable to need."

"Like never before!"

As I did every morning, I drove slowly through the yard. Saul's old Dodge was parked in the messy lot behind the machine shop, as he said it

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would be, between a disabled pickup and a rig I didn't even recognize. When it was new, Saul had had it gaily painted with curlicues and diddlies. Now it was ancient and dusty and scarred with souvenirs of his dreadful driving. there were two ragged stickers on the rear bumper: EAT AMERICAN LAMB — TWENTY MILLION COYOTES CAN'T BE WRONG! and LEMMINGS OF THE WORLD — UNITE!

"There's your new car," I told Franz. "After a bit, why don't you wander down this way, look things over at the shop, and then casually take possession?" I handed over the papers and the keys. "If, as I suspect, it's full of all sorts of interesting gadgets, just drive it over the warehouse loading bay. I'll join you there."

At the office, we told Laure about it, then waited half an hour. Finally, Franz went off, stopping to board both *Owl* and *Pussycat* for his regular nuke-pak inspections on the way, then taking a look-see through the shop. We saw him get into the van and, with what seemed to be a lot of backfiring and smogmaking, started what remained of its engine. He waved cheerfully to a couple of the hired hands as he backed it jerkily off the lot and headed for the warehouse.

I met him there, and waited while he let the engine gasp itself to death. The warehousemen were all inside the building, and no other vehicles were in the bay.

"Well?" I said.

He was wrestling his moustache in his excitement. "It's full of stuff!" He pointed back over his shoulder. "Cartons. One of 'em says its a Sears-Roebuck freezer, but I don't believe it — it's just about the right size and shape for Saul's drive. Then there are three or four more, one squarish and the rest wide and flat or flat and long. What do you want done with 'em?"

"Let's get them aboard *Owl* as soon as possible. Is there anything more ready to load on her today?"

"There's always something. Shall I ask the warehouse foreman?"

"Do that, Franz. I think there's still some of her galley equipment to go aboard, so I guess the freezer carton will be especially plausible. Get two or three of the men to help you move it, and if they get curious tell them some *damn fool of a truck driver dumped it* at the office. I'll join you on *Owl* when the job's been done."

"Where on *Owl* do you want it?"

"In the galley. Obviously. Besides, it's just forward of the engine room and under the command center."

I walked back to the office as casually as I could, and presently I heard Saul's van snorting and farting its way out to the pier.

We watched the unloading with a little apprehension, Laure and I, wishing the warehousemen hadn't had to be brought in, wondering if any of the cartons would treacherously break open, and congratulating ourselves that nothing, not even the freezer car-

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ton, turned out to be too heavy to move by muscle power and a large dolly. It took only twenty minutes — very long ones — after which Franz locked up *Owl* and drove the men back to their jobs.

Presently he joined us, and he and I walked back to *Owl* — walked when what we wanted to do was cover the distance in one leap. Laure, smiling, had shaken her head at our suggestion that she come with us. "It'd be too conspicuous after all the activity," she said. "Besides, I can wait. Women are so much more patient."

We boarded *Owl*, locking the entry hatch behind us. We went down to the galley. Franz had left the lights on, and there the cartons were.

"Which one first, Commander?"

"The freezer," I replied.

It looked new, as though it never had been opened — and for a moment I wondered whether Saul was playing a gigantic practical joke on us. I watched Franz taking out the heavy staples with a pry-bar, ripping the thick cardboard open.

It was not a freezer. It was exactly what Saul had said it would be — about five feet by three by two, fabricated of dull gray metal, with eight massive terminals and a score of smaller ones glaring from a deep recess along its top.

"That's *it!*" Franz cried.

"And what's *that?*" I pointed to one of Saul's big manilla envelopes scotch-taped beside the terminals.

He pulled it off, took out a thirty-page computer printout. I read over his shoulder:

OWNER'S MANUAL

Instructions for the Simple Installation and Everyday Operation of Your New Gilpin Star-Drive

Then,

Dear Consumer, (it began)

You are now the fortunate possessor of a genuine Gilpin Star-Drive. In installing and operating it you must observe certain precautions:

1. You must *not* install it in any vessel not designed expressly for extended undersea operation — motor cruisers, fishing trawlers, campers, destroyers, or whatever. The results would be disastrous.

2. Because of Mr. Gilpin's unique abilities, you must follow his instructions *to the letter.* (If you fail to understand any of the terms he uses, look them up in a good dictionary.)

Franz grinned at me. "He isn't giving us too much credit for intelligence."

"He's crediting us with a Gilpinesque sense of humor. Let's keep going — a few more insults aren't going to hurt us."

3. Please understand that Mr. Saul Gilpin, as a mere child, learned to speak (and to think in) the Hopi language before he even began to prat-

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tle English. That is why no one else can understand his view of the Universe and of the Natural Laws said to govern it. Therefore:

4. You must NEVER attempt to repair or *in any way* adjust your Gilpin Star-Drive. It is warranteed *never* to require repair or adjustment, and is so perfectly designed that it can readily installed with a few simple tools by any home handyman or nuclear engineer—

"Ouch!" said Franz.

"Hush! There's more to come."

These features have been adhered to throughout, so that anyone who has ever run an outboard motorboat can supervise its practical operation. (Former naval officers, however, are warned that they should read this handbook with special care. The Navy way so often just isn't the right way.)

"Shall I say *ouch* for you?" offered Franz.

"You shall not. Saul may have a point there. But before we dig any further into Saul's verbosities, let's sit down."

We pulled two chairs up to a galley table and went through the rest of Saul's Owner's Manual hastily. He had thought everything out clearly and beautifully. The first thing we learned was that the other three cartons, completely forgotten in our excitement, contained the computer elements he had designed to mate into the ship's ordinary computer system, extending many of its functions and performing others it never could perform. He also pointed out that, because computers were by no means as perfect as Gilpin Star-Drives, he was providing us with a superfluity of spares just in case.

Finally we came to the section on actual operation, lightheartedly headed *AND AWAY WE GO!*

1. The Gilpin Star-Drive transfers your vessel and all it may contain (including you) into another aspect of our Universe. It will appear to you, not that the normal Universe has ceased to exist, but that it has died suddenly and that you are now seeing, all around you, its very tenuous ghost. There will be no real light as we know it, but you will see the ever-present ghosts of sunlight (when you're close enough), of moonlight, of starlight, of every nebula and galaxy. You will be in a ghost-universe. (The Hopi, God bless them, would understand. How else do you think kachinas travel?)

2. In this ghost-universe, where you will seem to be the only real and living things, there will be no gravity as we know it, but there will be the ghost of gravity, and it is this ghost that your Gilpin Star-Drive and its computer will sense even when you cannot, so that you may traverse the ghost-distances between star and star.

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3. *Attendez, mes enfants!* Distance is not a function of "empty space," for if there were such a thing as truly *empty* space, it would be nondimensional. No, distance is a function of the forces of which Space is woven. In Gilpin's Space, these forces are mere ghosts. In its Drive Mode, your Space-Driver can and will perceive these ghosts and respond to them, so that you will never have to run the risk of transferring into Normal Space at any dangerous speed.

4. Your Gilpin Space-Drive's several Modes are:

a. Primary warm-up. (This is the mode Franz had witnessed.)

b. Idling.

c. Transfer, which is almost instantaneous.

d. Drive: forward, left, right, "up" and "down," and what for lack of a better term we can call braking or reverse. When the ghost-forces do not dictate otherwise, you will have full control over your vessel's speed. Gravity, *in* your vessel, will remain at one-half Earth-normal at all times (A service no other star-drive can provide).

e. Retransfer mode, which throws your vessel back into Normal Space, but only when all movement has ceased.

Ashamed at keeping Laure waiting, we leafed hastily through the rest of it: detailed instructions for installing the drive and its computers — the drive in a compartment somebody had thoughtfully engineered into the forward bulkhead of the ship's engine room, the computers in the control center, where there was just enough room for them.

Finally, I put it all back in its envelope. "Let's go back and show it to the Boss Lady," I said. "If she's mad at us, I don't blame her."

"I have the damnedest feeling," Franz answered as he locked up *Owl* behind us, "that none of us is going to waste any time getting mad at one another. Tammy Uemura and I can get that drive in and fastened down in half a day, I *think*, and I'll bet the computers won't be more difficult. We'd better fly Macartney over."

My mind threw questions at me as we walked. What preparations do you make for a sudden star flight? How do you provision your ship? What about simple things — like nuts and bolts? What about weapons? — I though of all the lurid covers on years of science fiction magazines and paperbacks. What about stored information — science and technology, music and art and literature, all inherited treasures of our past?

I said, "We'll get Macartney. I'll phone Ireland and tell him he's being promoted because Laure's changing company policy, and to get his tail over here as fast as possible."

Then I began to wonder how big a crew we'd really need. Though *Owl* and *Pussycat* and *Cupid's Arrow* could

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each sleep fourteen or more comfortably, Saul hadn't hesitated to put to sea — or put to space — with, unless he had left some out in the telling, a complement of only four.

When we got back to the office, Laure had scarcely missed us.

"We're getting Saul's material ready for publication," she told us. "Some of it's going to be on paper, but most of it'll be computerized — sent out on satellite autofax. And we're going to make sure of total international newscoverage. Trying to stop it is going to be like trying to kill dandelions or starlings. I'm pretty sure the way I've set it up is foolproof, and anyway Saul says he's made enough copies to make sure it'll come out no matter what."

"I know," I said, and wondered for a second whether he'd told us that just to make sure none of us would ever rat out to the IPP.

Then I told her about the equipment Saul had given us, and what Franz had said about getting it installed.

Laure gave it thirty seconds' thought. "Very well, Franz can get hold of Tammy Uemura, and you two can brief him. Then they can set to work. As soon as all that stuff's out of *Owl*'s galley and installed, we can finish up what's to be done on both *Owl* and *Pussycat*. There's still quite a bit to be loaded before their final trials, and we will have to get Macartney over right away. Don't forget — it's not just a matter of setting ourselves up with our private lifeboat...."

No one commented. We all knew that the term was apt.

"...We'll also have to get things started so that any general exploitation of Saul's material will be as simple and certain as possible. He's actually included a list of firms that built the individual pieces of the drive to his instructions, and another list of the cover descriptions — very ingenious ones — he used so that they'd not suspect what they were making. There's nothing more believable than the rich, oddball inventor of a perpetual motion machine! And once the cat is out of the bag, *any* information is going to be a help to space-drive builders. In the meantime, we'll give it out that something's wrong with *Owl*'s power plant — that'll explain Franz and his friends' backing and forthing. What are you going to do, Geoff?"

I told her I was going to get in touch with one or two Navy friends, like Garvey, to get a line on what Borg might be up to, and — in a pinch — see what help we might expect.

What the impact of instantly available star-drives on the world would be was simply mind-boggling, but that was not central to my worries. First, we had to get our own escape vehicle ready against the odds. How much might Whalen Borg suspect? How much might he already have found out? Yes, we could count on Franz, on Tammy Uemura, on Macartney and

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Dan Kellett, on Janet, and of course on Rhoda — unless a cunning enemy found points of vulnerability. But how could we be sure of other wives and other girl friends, of bosom friends and beloved relatives? Just the fear of a star voyage might be enough to purchase our betrayal, let alone the rewards the betrayer could expect from the Individualist Peoples' Party.

I sought out Dan, and gave him the whole picture; and he — bless him! gave me common sense. "Commander," he said, "just leave the local security end up to me. You're going to have enough to do, what with planning and coordinating — and practicing how to be a spaceship skipper."

V

I don't know how Franz broke the news to Tammy Uemura, but he told me later that they were at work on *Owl* within an hour. They let the word get out that she'd been having trouble with her nukepak, so no one asked questions when the preparatory work aboard her was suspended. I myself took Dan's advice. I knew how to get through to Garvey and one or two others who were sure — for the time being, at least — to have protected phones; and the office phone of a retired CPO, Paddy Garrison, an old friend of the admiral's now happily running a raunchy bar, gave me just what I wanted. He and I had four or five drinks together; then he went out to keep an eye on his topless-bottomless hired help. I made my calls collect, knowing that Ma Bell's records would be blank where Garvey's number was concerned.

"It's about the monster," I told him. "He's surfaced, and he's zeroing in on Laure."

"No surprise," he answered. "I read the papers. That sub of yours disappearing was made to order for that bastard. He's been looking for any way to get back at the admiral — you know it; I know it. Okay, I'll tell you what I can—"

He made it short and simple. Whalen Borg was very close to the top echelon of the IPP — but his position was precarious. Two men were struggling for second-place supremacy in the party: "Ham" Smithfield, who was Good Ol' Breck's Secretary of Defense, and Mort Marrone, who wanted to be. Smithfield had been Breck's buddy since the beginning, but for an IPP honcho he was cautious and pretty colorless, and lately Marrone, who headed a barely legal outfit called Individual Activists — funny uniforms and all — had been coming up fast. The word was out that before long there'd be a showdown. "And when that happens," Garvey told me, "chances are the loser's going down the drain like Herr Roehm — you've heard of him? Anyhow, Borg is Marrone's boy, and he's been promised — among other things — that if his boss gets Defense he'll be

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back in uniform with all honors and his fourth stripe at least. At *least*, Geoff. Just what this Navy needs."

"Jesus!" I said.

"Exactly. For now, and as long as this Marrone-Smithfield thing is up for grabs, he'll probably be on sort of a tight leash — if he tries anything too raw, it'll be on his own hook. But if Smithfield tumbles, that'll be a different matter. Some other big wheels — Interior, for one, and the Attorney General — are going to tumble with him, and then Marrone and his faction will be in with all four feet. They won't even wait till the elections before they start. There'll be nothing left holding Borg. And I mean *nothing*."

"You'll let us know at the first rumble?"

"At the first whisper," he promised me; and I thanked him and hung up, praying that "Ham" Smithfield would live and prosper and confound his enemies — at least his enemies in the IPP.

After that, I called one or two other old friends, and heard pretty much the same story. Then I drove back to the yard, and told Laure and Dan and Rhoda what I'd learned. "At least we may have a little warning if and when."

Laure smiled. "Geoff, it's good to know, but we can't count on it. Let's just pretend we don't have *any* friends, and keep things rolling as fast as possible. Then, if Borg strikes suddenly and we're warned in time, fine — and if not, well, we won't feel our legs have been kicked out from under us."

"Yes, Auntie Laure." I laughed and so did she. "Sorry you caught me whistling in the dark."

The next few days were busy ones — busy without a letup, and strangely schizoid. We knew — we felt it in our bones — that we were going to have a starship, that the fetters which had for so long bound man to Earth would at last be broken. But still it all seemed utterly unreal, like the first terrible hours of an unexpected war. That evening, at Laure's place, we again held council, and it was decided, first that *Pussycat* be prepared for sea as fast and inconspicuously as possible, secondly that we pick a crew for her — a crew to whom we would tell nothing, not right now, but one that at least might be a good bet to pick up where we'd left off if, somehow, Borg did stop us or if we were forced to flee prematurely to the stars in *Owl*. Her captain had already been selected — Phil Placek, a hell of a good man now several years with the firm. Names were suggested and considered, one or two of Dan's boys, one or two engineers, a computer specialist, a couple of college friends of Franz's who were deeply into the space thing. We didn't go so far as to choose them then, but we felt that we were getting somewhere; and we did decide — or at least Laure decided — that *Pussycat* would be put to sea at least a day or two before the work on *Owl* was finished.

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"Then," she said, "if she gets back while *Owl* is gone, she can take *Owl*'s mooring, and anyone sneaking around will be hard put to tell which is which unless he's familiar with both of them. A little confusion never hurt anyone."

Next day Jamie Macartney arrived, a short, freckled, deceptively tubby Scot of the type you sometimes see beating the devil out of a great drum in a Highland band, and Laure and I met him at the airport. "Of course, I heard about poor old Saul vanishing," he said. "You don't mind if I say I don't believe a word of it? I suppose the man's invented something horrifying. Is it a time-machine? No? Well, how about a matter synthesizer — you know, free roasts of beef out of the waste-compactor? Shall I go on?"

"None of those," Laure told him, but it's just as startling."

"So that's why I'm over here so suddenly?"

"Right on, Jamie," I said. "Saul has indeed invented something. He's given us a starship, using a drive no one else in the world can understand, and we're hustling like the devil to keep our Darth Vadars from getting hold of it."

"And succeeding, I expect," Macartney didn't bat an eye. "Well, if it's astronauts you want — First Contact, Earthman's Burden types — I'm your man, and I've a wife, a teenage boy, two girls, and two fat British cats, all as mad as I am. When do we start? I suppose you realize that star travel has to be a family affair? Can't start a civilization with a crew of — forgive my saying so — San Francisco lads. No offense intended."

"Nor taken," I replied, laughing. "But Jamie, please try to understand — we're *serious*."

"My God, man! So am *I*."

That kind of vote of confidence does something for one. I told him what I could, and after we had dropped his luggage at Laure's apartment, he insisted on going directly to the yard, where it took him only minutes to bid us farewell and join Franz and Tammy in *Owl*'s innards.

We went directly to the office, where we found Rhoda hard at work on the preparatory program Saul had outlined — what to publish, when to publish, where to keep it hidden till it was time to publish. Saul had even left orders, under his perpetual-motion-inventor cover name, for the drive components for *Pussycat*, which was nice to know because by this time we were all convinced she'd need them.

We worked. We chose the crew for *Pussycat*, bearing in mind not only their ability, but also the strong possibility that they, too, would become astronauts — and that they might be subjected to threats and temptations and even direct peril from the IPP. Star flight was a subject that still seemed totally unreal to me; I had to tell myself that it could quite safely remain unreal until the drive now being installed in *Owl* had been tried out. It was Macartney who wisely pointed

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out that, given everything Saul had promised us, there was no reason why we had to abandon Earth completely — at least the first time out. We could return. From Gilpin's Space, we could set *Owl* down anywhere, on land or sea. If there were supplies we thought it would be indiscreet to buy openly in the United States, he could arrange to purchase them in the U.K. or Ireland. He and his brother Andrew owned a ketch together, a forty-footer, and we could rendezvous at sea and transfer everything. He grinned. "When you pick up my family and me," he said.

And that brought up another question. A nukepak doesn't last forever. At sea, it's good for perhaps three years of more or less steady cruising, but we had yet to discover how long it might last in space. It would be necessary either to carry one or two spares aboard, or else have them stashed away where we could return and pick them up without anyone being the wiser. Saul had assured us that there was no way the powers that be could detect us once we were in Gilpin's Space, but what would they be able to do a year from now, or three, or five — after the whole world had his plans?

We worked, and the days flew by. By the afternoon of the third, Franz reported jubilantly that he and Tammy and Macartney had completed the installation of *Owl*'s drive and computer complex. It's a poor engineer who can't handle his own tools, and they had been able to do all the work themselves, not needing to call in outside help. I went aboard. The drive was completely out of sight in its compartment off the power area. The new computers were installed, two extra seats in front of them, next to the ship's basic computer in the control area. Their several screens were dark, their displays dull and dead. But Tammy and Macartney were waiting there eagerly. I saw that Saul's assembly manual, now well-thumbed, was much in evidence.

Franz pointed proudly to one panel of displays. "It tells us how far we are from any object we designate in normal space — any object we're headed for, any on which we might be planning to set down, or any that might be heading towards us." He turned it on, and the displays glowed: *0, 0, 0, 0.* "Right now, it's concerned only with the set-down part. We're down, and it tells us so. Would you believe that the topmost line reads in centimeters, the next in meters, and the one below that in kilometers?"

"And those bottom three?" I asked.

"The first two—" He paused for effect. "—the first two, Commander, read in light-minutes and light-years, and the third — well, I don't yet know *what* it reads in. All I know is that Saul has it labeled *For Extra-Galactic Use Only.*" He saw the look on my face. "There's more coming," he told me gleefully, as another display lit up. "That one tells us our acceleration in G's — Saul says in pseudo-G's because

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there's only the ghost of gravity in Gilpin's Space; and the one next to it informs us how fast we're going at any given instant. It has six different readout values, corresponding — so Saul says — to those on the distance readouts. We gather that there's just no limit to how fast we can go — except that when we get too close to objects in real space, the drive and its field take over, and we are decelerated automatically."

He showed me the drive controls, and even though I had read what Saul had to say, I still was astounded at their simplicity. UP — DOWN. FORWARD — REVERSE. LEFT — RIGHT. "Those are just the manual ones," Franz said. "You set the incrementals on the computer or, if you forget to, it'll do it for you, keeping within safe limits. You set the modes manually, too. Look: OFF. ON. IDLE. And GILPIN'S SPACE. That's the spooky one. When you touch down, you reverse the procedure, but you have to be down to do it. It won't work when you're moving. Well, shall I turn it on?"

"You mean *now?*"

They all laughed. "Yes, indeed," Macartney answered, "we've had it on three times already without going anywhere, just like warming up your engine in the morning. But watch the power it gobbles. You'll be impressed."

Franz turned it on. Nothing happened. There was not a quiver, not a sound. But the dials that told us what power the nukepak was turning out swung over till they hit their pins, and stayed there.

"My God Almighty, where's it *going?*"

"We think it's flowing into Gilpin's Space," said Tammy, "and it sort of scares me to think that if Franz throws that next switch we'll be flowing with it. You never can tell about these mad Magyars."

VI

Later that day, I sent Dan over for a demonstration, but both Laure and Rhoda said they'd wait, Laure having pointed out that we'd be sensible to avoid anything that looked like a special Ladies' Day aboard *Owl*, especially after having publicized the ship's alleged nukepak troubles. But she ordered *Pussycat* to be ready to put to sea for her tests, fully provisioned, within forty-eight hours, and had Rhoda notify the friendlier members of the media. "We'll emphasize *Pussycat*'s research and recovery functions," she declared, "and let them know again how the conglomerates stole *Cupid's Arrow* because they thought we'd made a major breakthrough in drive design. We'll let a few reporters come aboard, just to show them that even though our vessels are superior there's nothing worth stealing a whole ship for."

"And *Owl?*" I asked.

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"*Owl* will be off-limits, naturally. After nukepak troubles, any ship is. We'll tell them we still don't have it completely ironed out."

"We're damn lucky," I told her, "that the conglomerates pulled the Coast Guard's fangs where it comes to inspecting merchant vessels. If this had happened back in the seventies or eighties, we'd have them swarming over us. Then where would we be?"

She patted my hand maternally. "Not in Gilpin's Space, Geoff, not anywhere near it. As matters stand, maybe we can do most of our loading and provisioning without exciting too much undue interest. I hope we can. Let's get together again this evening and see what sort of lists everyone comes up with. I've thought of food and water and star-charts, weapons, medicines — that's going to be your Janet's department, isn't it? — whatever lab equipment you can think of, a basic scientific and cultural library, not just computerized but also books, and music and — oh, one could go on forever, couldn't one?"

I reminded her of what Macartney had said about our not being cut off from Earth entirely.

"Perhaps that's true," she answered. "But it may not be. You may be able to scuttle back to Earth as easily and as often as you want, but let's not rely on it. The first thing the IPP's going to do — and the Russians, too — is try to develop a Gilpin's Drive detector. Wait and see. Let's make *Owl* as self-sufficient as we can."

Everything went well — perhaps, I thought, a bit too well. One of Dan's boys found a bug newly installed on one of the warehouse phones; it was where it could easily have been placed by any one of a hundred deliverymen. Besides that, several of us had the feeling that occasionally somebody'd been tailing us, but we never caught them at it, and were never sure. In any case, none of it really smelled like Whalen Borg.

Then, the day before *Pussycat*'s maiden voyage, Dan told me that Rhoda's brother was back pestering her.

"Mooching again?" I asked.

"No, and that's what sort of worries me. He seems pretty flush — new clothes, flashy new car, so she tells me — and he swears all he wants to do is kiss and make up. 'Let's take in a show like when we were kids,' all that sort of thing. That's not like Arley. Now his latest notion is he wants Rhoda to go to some kind of birthday party he's cooking up for Grandma, and I've been trying to talk her out of it. The old gal lives a hundred miles away — a retirement community near that Saltmarsh development, which means Rhoda'd probably have to stay the night. Do you suppose Borg's people and the IPP could be pulling Arley's strings?"

I didn't think it likely. Arley was certainly a punk, but he rated zero for reliability and I'd never have put him

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down as a hit-man type. "It seems to me, Dan, that they could think up half a hundred better ways to go about it."

"I hope you're right, Commander. I've been doing everything I can to make sure Borg's people don't get to her, either through Arley or any other way. I — I guess you know I've moved in with her?" To my surprise, he blushed beet-red, something I didn't know ex-Marines could do. "I — I guess we'd better not say anything — that is, I mean, to Mrs. Endicott?"

"Our Mrs. Endicott," I told him, "is a very sophisicated, very kindly, very compassionate person. The fact that she is older than you or me doesn't mean she doesn't know that men and women who love each other frequently sleep together. I'm sure her only reaction would be to wish you well, and perhaps hint gently that she'd be generous with a wedding present. As to the Arley business, why don't you drive her to her grandmother's, stay the night in a motel, and bring her back the next day? If she won't hold still for that, you can follow her and keep an eye on things from behind the bushes. If I can't come with you, you can take one of the company cars and any of the boys you feel you can trust with something all that personal."

"Well, first I'll try again to talk her out of it. She knows that anybody might have enough on Arley, what with his drugs and dirty little deals, to foreclose on his soul anytime they want to, but she still says he never, never, *never* would hurt *her*."

"What day's this birthday party scheduled for?"

"Saturday — next Saturday, that is."

"Well, that gives us at least a little time to think about it. Today's only Tuesday, and *Pussycat*'s first run starts tomorrow. We're planning to have her back by Friday, and as of now Friday night's set for *Owl*'s first flight. I suppose flight *is* the right word?"

A chill went through me at all the word's implications; and little problems like Rhoda's brother Arley suddenly seemed utterly insignificant by comparison.

They shouldn't have. I should have remembered that there are two ways to procure effective service even from men as chickenshit as Arley. One is by offering huge rewards. The other is by instilling sheer terror. Whalen Borg knew how to use both.

Pussycat put to sea on the Wednesday morning, seen off by a few friendly media people, a few not so friendly, and the wives and girlfriends of her small crew. As we expected with Phil Placek in command, all went well. She performed beautifully, on the surface and submerged, attained speeds a bit higher than expected, and set a record for the efficient use of power. Phil's reports came right on schedule; and on Thursday afternoon he topped them off by locating and identifying, at a depth of half a mile, the wreck of a

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paddlewheel steamer, *Narwhal*, which had gone down in the 1860s and was reputed to have carried a probably mythical vast sum in minted gold. It was beautiful publicity, and a personal triumph for him, for he had been digging into the old records for years to get a line on where she lay. We, of course, were pleased, but we weren't excited. A living starship fired our imaginations — yes, and our fears — far more than any long-dead vessel, regardless of her treasure trove.

Supplies — everything we could think of — were now being delivered constantly to *Owl;* and we announced that, after *Pussycat*'s return and *Owl*'s own shakedown cruise, we were planning to send both ships out on a major salvage expedition — destination undisclosed, but very far away. That way, a lot could be loaded openly which might otherwise have been questioned. There were a lot of things, too, that we sneaked aboard either personally or in closed cartons: Franz Andradi's Celestron telescope (because we simply didn't want anyone even to think of stars where *Owl* was concerned,) and far more of a reference library than a ship of her size usually carries, and even a partially dismantled light four-wheel-drive vehicle. Laure paid for all of it, using her personal funds where that was preferable; yard money where it didn't matter. Macartney had reserved air passage back to Ireland for Saturday, as soon after the tryout as possible, and we had worked up a list of stuff to be procured overseas which he'd already sent on to his brother: scientific instruments, more medical supplies, communications equipment useful only on dry land, cold weather clothing, and a miscellany of other things which would have seemed wildly improbable as equipment for any submarine.

"We can do it," he told us. "Andrew's an accomplished scrounger. But there's one thing we'll have to remember. According to your friend Gentle Saul, there can be no communication with you once you're in Gilpin's Space. We'll have to wait till you're down. So we'd better set up our rendezvous where you can easily find us, and also where our lying off the coast for days will seem quite natural — somewhere, I'd say, where the fishing's good. Luckily, at this time of year, we probably won't have to worry where weather is concerned. With my wife and kids aboard, to say nothing of the cats, it'll look like a nice, lazy family party, in case anybody gets curious. Anyhow, Andrew knows just about all the officialdom in those parts. Even when he comes back to port without us, he'll be believed when he tells everyone that we cruised down to Skerrytown and he dropped us all off there because you were transferring me to the States and it's closer to the airports."

Early Friday morning, right on schedule, *Pussycat* was back at her moorings, and Phil Placek, proud as punch, was showing the media folk

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pictures of what remained of *Narwhal*'s hull and engines, and being photographed holding her bronze nameplate. (Next day, one of the IPP papers actually printed an editorial saying that petty salvage was a proper activity for wildcat enterprise to busy itself with, and that Mrs. Endicott was, for the first time in years, showing good sense and recognizing the hard technological and economic realities of the times.) Mrs. Endicott and I took Placek and his engineer to lunch, and promised them — feeling guilty because the promise might very well prove false — that the yard would throw a proper party to celebrate their achievement as soon as possible, but that we couldn't right away because I was going to take *Owl* out for her initial trials that evening. I explained that we had to be sure of her nukepak, and that we also wanted to check out her diving capabilities. It was a good time to do it because the work week was over, and our being away wouldn't leave anybody idle.

After lunch, we drove back to the yard: Placek and the engineer to do their final checkup on *Pussycat*, Laure to her office, and I to join Franz and Tammy aboard *Owl*, where at least we could find enough to keep us busy and make the waiting until late afternoon less unbearable. I had decided not to start out till five or six at least, and of course not to dive until we were well out at sea. I wanted to be sure that, even when the time came to go into Gilpin's Space, even if first we had to dive and surface a dozen times, we would not be observed. Saul had made it clear that, though the shift could be made while we were on the surface of the sea, trying it submerged might be perilous. "Let's pray for fog," I said, "and for some nice dark clouds against the moon. I don't want a pretty little Coast Guard cutter seeing what Dan and Rhoda saw, and maybe even getting a photograph. I don't even want any crazy fisherman yelling he's seen the ghost of a submersible Flying Dutchman."

Against our urgings — for who had better right than she? — Laure refused to go. No, she had said, if she were seen it would be too much of a break with the established order, too conspicuous. Dan, too, when I came ashore to see if he was ready, had said he couldn't — there was no way he could leave Rhoda with the question of that damn party still unresolved.

"We can come later, Geoff," Laure said, seeing my disappointment. "Dan has to do what he thinks is right, and so do I." She smiled wonderfully. "But there's someone else who really wants to go."

"Who?" I asked.

"Go back to *Owl* and you'll find out. Somebody sneaked aboard while you were walking over. Franz phoned to tell me, but he made me promise not to tell."

I hurried back, trying all the way to guess. Was it Phil Placek, hungry for

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more adventure? Or some loyal employee bent on being of service? Or even Mrs. Rasmussen's Boy Scout grandson?

But it was none of them. It was, as I should have suspected, my Janet.

"You," I told her, "are supposed to be ashore practicing medicine."

She stood there in the galley, with Franz and Tammy pretending to protect her from my wrath, and laughed at me, and said, "Geoffrey Cormac, did you think for one moment that I'd let you go kiting off to strange planets and strange stars without me? I've read science fiction magazines. I know what kind of females they have out there. So—"

"So-o?" I said.

"So I'm your ship's doctor, your ship's cook, and the official guardian of your morals if you decide to land on another world."

VII

There was some overcast when we set out, a fresh wind from the sea, and a very mild chop. As we pulled out into the channel, a small Coast Guard cutter started tagging along, tactfully keeping half a mile or more behind, but still obviously following us. We didn't watch her; there would've been no point to it — and besides, we were too busy checking on *Owl*'s performance. It took us three quarters of an hour to get to where I had planned our first diving test. I saw a fogbank in the distance, and the wind was right. I took *Owl* down, forcing myself through all the prescribed routines to determine her behavior and seaworthiness submerged. It was perfect. After about twenty minutes, we went up again and, breaking water, saw that the cutter was still circling around, a little aimlessly, now perhaps three miles away.

Both *Owl* and *Pussycat* had been designed for maximum visibility down deep; their viewports would have been impossible fifteen or ten or even five years before because the technology for the perfect clarity, the immense strength, and insensitivity to temperature changes simply hadn't existed. Franz, who had gone through a phase of being an antique railroad nut, had dubbed our control tower "the caboose." We had a clear view forward and aft and to either side. It was actually frightening until you got used to it, for duroquartz is virtually invisible — you could hardly believe in its existence, or that behind it you were safe from the tremendous pressures doing their best to crush it and destroy you.

We dived six more times before we saw that the cutter had given us up as a bad job, and was just slipping out of sight around a distant headland. Night had fallen, but the moon was up, almost at its full. The wind had freshened, and the fogbank was almost over us.

I took her down once more, just for

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luck; and when we surfaced ten minutes later the thick fog, whitened by moonlight, held us in its arms.

We all looked at each other in utter silence — until I realized that it was now up to me to take that first step into the unknown, the impossible, the still not-quite-believed.

"Well," I said, "let's get things started."

Franz sat down, taking a seat to the left of the computer console, where he had access to all the power controls. Feeling thoroughly unreal, even though we had rehearsed the procedure half a hundred times during the past three days, I sat down in the chair to his right — the navigational controls in front of me.

I watched Franz's fingers move; and the console told us that *Owl*'s conventional drive was off. They moved again, and the dials that told of the vast flow of energy in Saul's drive swung over steadily until they hit their pins.

Franz turned, pale as a ghost. "Ready, Commander?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and Franz touched the control labeled GILPIN'S SPACE.

For an instant, nothing seemed to happen. Then, so suddenly that it took me a moment to become fully aware of it, I felt as though I had been lifted in my seat — and recalled Saul telling us that we would have half Earth-gravity.

Then, simultaneously, every light went out, the glowing computer displays dimmed, and a voice filled the room. We all recognized it immediately.

"This is a recording," it announced. "Have no fear! You are listening to the voice of your old friend, Soft-Hearted Saul, the Spaceman's Friend. Welcome to Gilpin's Space, which you — the as-yet-favored few — now share with me, my dear daughter Polly Esther, her husband Marco Guglielmi, two other very devoted couples whom we picked up on our way, and my own lovely wife Lillian — to say nothing of myriads of weird alien creatures whom you do not yet know exist, but whose whispers we believe we may have heard. Well, we can all worry about *them* later. Now, for your welcome, I have arranged, as you have seen, for the lights to be turned out. That is so that you can go to your windows and look out for the first time upon Gilpin's Space and all its wonders. I will say no more until you have had a chance to do so."

Janet laughed a little hysterically. If a man can chuckle hysterically, that's what Franz did. Tammy Uemura uttered an expletive in Japanese.

Macartney was the calmest of us all. "Ah!" he remarked. "The man's just trying to make us feel at home. Let's take a look and see all that's so wonderful about it."

We moved up to the enormous viewpoints. We saw the sea. We saw the world. We saw the moon and stars. We saw the Universe. But this was not

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the Universe that we had known. This was its ghost — transparent, tenuous as a forgotten dream, but real, real, *real* with a reality none of us had seen before. In part at least, this was due to its clarity, every minute detail of every ghostly wavelet shown as though drawn in infinite microscopic detail by some supernatural Leonardo, every far ghostly star with its infinitestimal nimbus — of light? No, of light's ghosts. There were no colors there, only their memories, as though the entire spectrum had been reduced to specters scarcely seen but movingly remembered.

We stared, saying nothing. This was the Universe through which we'd move, the Universe that bridged the distances between the stars.

Overhead, the moon's thin spirit sailed the skies; and abruptly I realized the fog was gone, that fogs must be too wraithlike to have ghosts.

The lights came on. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," Saul's voice said. "God bless you all."

"Let's go," said Macartney soberly; and that seemed to cover everything.

Franz and I took our seats again, now fully conscious of our much lighter weight.

"Watch at the ports," I told the others. "Tell me what you see."

Slowly, I moved the control that said UP, and felt nothing. Franz and I looked at each other. Then we looked at the display that read in meters: 243, it read.

"We've risen!" Janet cried out excitedly. "We — we're flying. We're above the sea!"

"Let's take her up to a thousand," I said to Franz, and he nodded.

A few seconds later, the display read 1003.

I tried the control that said FORWARD, and Tammy and Janet both reported that we were under way.

After that — well, for half an hour or so we were like a young man trying out his first new car, seeing what it would do, putting it through its paces. Twice we touched down again on the surface of the sea. Once, at almost ten thousand meters, the computer seemed to slow us momentarily and we saw the ghost of what must have been a supersonic jet against the sky. I ordered the lights turned down again so we could see Gilpin's Space more clearly, and we headed south, following the eerie tracery of the coast against the even fainter ectoplasm of the sea. We looked down at what, in our segment of the Universe, was Mexico. Sharply, we turned north. The Rockies were like pointlace under us. Our rates of acceleration and deceleration were absolutely unbelievable. So was the fact that we experienced none of their effects. Indeed, had it not been for our viewpoints and the glowing displays in front of us, we never would have known that we moved.

The realization hit us suddenly and simultaneously. What Saul Gilpin had given us was *real*. It was the ultimate

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in magic carpets. We could cross a continent in minutes — when we had scarcely *started* to accelerate. A mightly ocean was a frog-jump for us, nothing more. The great Earth itself was a mere pebble, to be glanced at and left behind. We were absolutely drunk with it, with the knowledge that now nothing, *nothing* stood between us and the beckoning stars, the calling galaxies.

Macartney went into the galley, Janet following him, and returned a moment later with five glasses and a bottle of fine brandy. "One round," he said triumphantly. "One only! We need no more."

Janet filled the glasses, and — one sip at a time — we toasted Saul, then *Owl*, then Gilpin's Space. Laughing, we toasted extraterrestrials everywhere. Finally, "To far journeys!" proposed Franz soberly; and "To new worlds, new homes!" I added, remembering what our purpose was.

I set *Owl* down again somewhere in the South Atlantic, just long enough to contact Dan, still on duty at the yard, by satellite phone.

"Well, *that's* a relief!" he said. "We were beginning to think *Owl* went down and didn't come back up."

"No, everything's all right," I told him, striving to keep my own excitement out of my voice, even though of course the call was scrambled. "*Owl's* performance has been beyond all expectations — better than *Pussycat's*, Dan, so much better that we've decided to keep on with the tests we'd planned for later."

"That means you'll be home late?"

"Right. How much later, I don't know yet. From the looks of things, I'd say — hell, it's just a guess, maybe twenty-four hours."

"Well, we won't keep dinner for you, but there'll be a welcoming committee. I'll get on the horn to Mrs. Endicott and let her know. I just wish I were with you people now, that's all."

He didn't try to talk us out of it, so I knew that Laure had left no instructions for us to hurry back. Anyhow, at that stage it would've been like trying to talk De Quincey out of an opium dream.

I broke off, and threw *Owl* back into Gilpin's Space as fast as possible.

"Let's shoot for the Moon," I said.

Nobody argued, so I took her up again — and the trip took us exactly twenty-seven minutes, including acceleration and deceleration, and these were automatic, by the book. The dead Moon's ghost was even stranger than the living Earth's, pallid and — even though in Gilpin's Space you always had the feeling that there was no true light — curiously translucent.

We circled slowly, gawking like tourists at that mysterious moonscape, filled with wonder but bored nonetheless because in the living Universe it was already dead. We looked at it, eating sandwiches and drinking coffee.

And then—

Then we set out on tour of the So-

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lar System, the inner planets first, then the great outer giants, and finally frozen Pluto — and they all were ghosts, insubstantial, nebulous. Even the great, glorious Sun, that roaring furnace which had fueled our lives, no longer warmed us. In Gilpin's Space, even though we could see hints of the turmoil in its corona, it was only a greater ghosts among the lesser ones. And yet always, always there were those hints of colors that were not there, infinitely elusive, infinitely tantalizing.

Four times we set *Owl* down — *very* carefully — on alien soil. Twice on Mars — who could resist doing that? — where for a quarter-hour or so we shifted into normal space to look at Nix Olympica and the Great Rift, and again for a few minutes on a moon of Saturn's, a moon of Jupiter's — mostly, I think, to remind ourselves that normal space still existed.

For Gilpin's Space was even stranger than we had first perceived. No matter what speed we had attained, we had observed no change in its persistent pseudolight.

Franz first commented on this. "So far, there seems to be no limit to our velocity. Our acceleration rate hasn't even started to level off. Of course, the distances we've covered are no great shakes astronomically, but still I'd have expected some spectroscopic evidence of motion."

"What makes you think *anything* in Gilpin's Space yields spectroscopic evidence?" said Tammy Uemura. "That's just not real light out there."

"Then what am I seeing with my eyes?" demanded Franz.

"Spooks," Tammy answered. "Remember all those UFO reports — impossible acceleration, impossibly quick turns, instant appearances and disappearances? That's us. In this phase, or aspect, or whatever you want to call it, of the Universe, *we're* not real. If Gilpin's Space has its own conscious entities, we must be spooks to them. That's why we seem to be exempt from the laws of physics — just as ghosts are, and always have been, in our own non-Gilpin Space."

"My best friend," laughed Franz, "and I never guessed he was an eminent authority on the physics of the supernatural!"

"I'm not." Tammy bowed, looking very well satisfied with himself. "I am a modest man. I would refrain from displaying my own erudition, especially to Westerners. The authority was my Uncle Hiroshi. He was a Buddhist priest, a very learned man who wrote all sorts of abstruse books. He knew all about ghosts and their doings, and he passed a little of his knowledge on to me. It's all very simple if you understand it. Needless to say, *I* don't."

"Well, I dare say it's as good an explanation as any we're likely to come up with," said Macartney wryly. "My question is a bit more practical. Geoff, where do we go from here?"

There was one answer to that, and

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one only. "Out!" I answered, pointing to the vast vault of heaven, so faint, so finely etched, so crystal clear. "Out there! We *can't* go straight back now. Let's aim her at a star — Alpha Centauri A, for my money — and see how fast she'll *really* go." I looked at each of them, and saw the same expression on each face: that terrible, lovely eagerness which sparks all adventures into the unknown. "I see," I said, "that we're agreed."

There was no discussion. Carefully, I turned *Owl* so that the three suns of the Alpha Centauri system — or their ghosts — lay dead ahead. I asked Franz and Macartney to check the star charts to make doubly sure, and to zero in on Alpha Centauri A as closely as the computer would permit. We started to accelerate.

We watched the readout as its numbers climbed. For a half-hour we watched it. We also watched those still not-quite-believable displays that gave us our distance from the object we were aiming at and the rate at which we were approaching it. We did not find out then what our maximum acceleration and speed might be — frankly, because I was afraid to. It is hard for anyone accustomed to Earth speeds to adjust to traveling at velocities of millions of kilometers a second. After that half-hour, when I realized that even at the speed we had attained, we would reach our destination *in less than seven hours*, I cut back to where our speed was constant and we were accelerating no longer.

"We'll get there soon enough," I said. "Dammit, it's be presumptuous of us to rush at man's first new star!"

"Damned presumptuous!" said Macartney. "We don't want everybody saying that Earthmen haven't decent manners, do we now?"

Everyone agreed crazily that we did not. We were all wildly excited, afire in our elation, and not quite in our right minds — whatever that may mean. What did we do? We ate our dinner. Franz and Janet and Tammy got it ready, and it was a banquet. Everything tasted better than it ever had before. The white wine was superb; the red, superlative.

And we talked. We talked about Man's future in space, about the infinite possibilities of First Encounters with other sentient beings, about what every well-equipped spaceship needed. We had no doubts about the future then — how could we, with Alpha Centauri A so near, so very near? And with all the rest of the Universe opening its arms to us? Besides, we had made a discovery that had excited us even more — that as soon as we ceased to accelerate, the power drain to the drive dropped to a small fraction of what it had been, apparantly just enough to keep us in Gilpin's Space. We knew now that on one nukepak we could probably stay in space almost indefinitely, especially when the problems of air renewal and water recycling had been solved more than a decade

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before, when subs were still not too vulnerable to use in war and there was a premium on the ability to run submerged forever and amen.

On and on we hurtled, and our speed did not slacken. Earlier we would have worried; now we knew that there seemed to be no limit to our acceleration rate and there would be none to the rate with which we were decelerated when the drive-computer complex decided the time had come. Then finally, after six and a half hours, our speed began to drop; the acceleration display, instead of reading zero, started showing minus quantities; and we saw that the still-incredible distance separating us from our goal was diminishing. It was uncanny. It was like participating in the illusion of a telehologram. We felt nothing. We were part of the unreality.

The thought did not sober us. We were triumphant, and reveling in our triumph.

Then, at long last, the ghost-point that was our star became an infinitesimal disc, but still a ghost, still as faint, as sharply scribed, and as utterly clear as all else in Gilpin's Space.

It grew, and we watched it grow. We watched it — that star so much like our own sun — until it subtended as much of its own sky as our sun did from Earth. At that point, I slowed *Owl*'s speed to zero, and we hung there, staring at our great cold goblin star. I was tempted — we all were — to shift into normal space just for a second. We resisted the temptation, knowing that if we gave in to it, even if we came to no harm from radiant energy, we'd then go on, searching for planets almost certainly not there, not in a three-star system, and perhaps taking more time to visit Alpha Centauri A's companions. We made one powered orbit, simply as a symbolic gesture.

Then, "Franz," I said, "let's tell the computer to take us home."

He touched the necessary keys, watching the displays as they reported our new course, our renewed acceleration. He grinned at all of us.

"What was that funny word you used?" he asked.

"Home?" I answered — and then I caught his meaning, knowing that no matter what occurred Earth could no longer be our home or *Owl*'s home port, that maybe in the future we would be able to come back openly — but that that future was bound to be uncertain and perilous and far away.

Then we did sober up. We were still triumphant, but now there was more to it than simple euphoria. There was determination.

On the return, we took turns napping. We ate again, as humans must eat to keep the fires fueled. And we kept busy, exultantly.

We set *Owl* down in the Pacific within a mile of where we'd taken off, and even though there was a rain and nothing whatever in sight, I submerged immediately, not surfacing again until

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we were just about to enter port. Then I radioed ahead that we'd returned, and that *Owl* had behaved perfectly; and Dan's voice, strangely agitated, told me to for Christ's sake hurry up. I knew better than to question him.

When we pulled up to our dock and moored once again behind *Pussycat*, we had been gone twenty-three hours and fourteen minutes, having performed a voyage longer than all the sea voyages of man's long history, *all of them together.*

VIII

The dock was brightly lighted, and we could see that people were waiting for us there: Laure, of course, and Dan and Sousa, and Whittington — another old reliable — standing at the door of a company car. As soon as the short gangplank was in place, they came aboard, but their faces showed none of the excited anticipation we'd naturally expected. For the first time since I had known her, Laure looked frightened, and Dan's face was taut and grim.

Once I had a long talk with a friend who was deeply into mysticism, and listened to him describe an out-of-the-body experience he'd sworn he had. He found himself projected into realms of seeing and knowing more wonderful than he ever could have dreamed, with no desire ever to return — and then, suddenly, something had told him very firmly *NO!*, and he had been snapped back into the dull body he had left behind, in one dreadful instant and irresistibly.

I looked at Laure and Dan and, like my mystic friend, I was instantly and painfully brought back to Earth, a cruel Earth, an Earth only too, too real.

"*What's happened?*" I exclaimed.

Dan choked, then got the words out. "Rhoda — Rhoda's gone."

"It was her brother," Laure said. "Arley. She told Dan that the birthday party was going to start early, and that she'd stay with her grandmother tonight. She said Dan could come for her tomorrow morning, and he was *not* to follow her."

"I shouldn't have fallen for it. I *should've* tailed her. But it wasn't until half an hour ago that I began to wonder whether she'd got there safely." Dan's angry voice was gaining strength. "I phoned the old lady, and she said, yes indeed, Rhoda and Arley had arrived; and she started to tell me about all the presents they had brought, and the cake, and the catered dinner. I tried to cut her off, but she kept on reciting until I really busted in on her: Was Rhoda *there?* Was Rhoda okay? Then she started crying and getting damn near hysterical. No, Rhoda *wasn't* there. Right after supper, she'd started getting faint, said her eyes were playing tricks on her — and wasn't it just like that silly girl to spoil *her* birthday party by getting herself sick?

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Drinking all that liquor and eating all that cake and — Believe me, I had to yell like hell just to get her to tell me that Arley had driven off with her, she thought to find a doctor, or the emergency hospital or something."

Rhoda's symptoms sounded like those brought on by one well-known nasty substance from the increasingly sophisticated pharmacopoeia of coercion — a preparation usually given orally and followed by an even nastier shot. I said so, and Laure nodded. "If something isn't done," she said, "and very, very soon, Rhoda's going to tell everything she knows. It won't be her fault. She won't be able to help herself. But what can we do?"

"Depends on where they've taken her," Dan growled. "If it's to Arley's place, maybe we've got a chance. I looked through Rhoda's desk and found his phone number, a new one, and then ran down his address. He's got himself a condo maybe twenty miles away, between here and Grandma's place."

"It seems to me," I said, "that at this stage of the game they'd almost certainly take her there. If anything went wrong, it'd be just about impossible to nail them for kidnapping — not at her brother's place, after her going to a birthday party with him. Anyhow, it's the only lead we have, and how we use it is strictly up to us. It'd be no use going to the law — none at all."

I thought of the glorious ghost of Alpha Centauri A in Gilpin's Space, of the journey we'd just made, of the welcoming Universe — and of the people who'd move instantly to deny it to us.

"Then it's up to us to act," Laure said very quietly.

"Exactly," I replied. "Dan, which of your boys can you *really* trust — I mean who you'd tell the whole story to if you had to?"

"Sousa," he answered, "definitely. And Whittington."

"Very well, then. It'll be you and me and the two of them. Macartney has to catch his plane, and Franz and Tammy still have a lot of buttoning up to do on *Owl*. Stun-guns and laser pistols. Oh yes, and a couple of air pistols with veterinary tranquilizer darts. We'll damn well have to manage the whole business silently. Let's hit the road. Laure, we'll be in touch. We'll let you know immediately whichever way it goes. We'll take two cars. Sousa and Whittington can tail us. And Janet, I guess maybe you'd better come with Dan and me. Rhoda's going to need more than just tender loving care, even if we get there before they have a chance to pump that shot into her."

We picked up the second car, and were on our way, driving as inconspicuously as we could. Low limits impose a terrible impatience when the need for speed is genuine and you're praying you won't be too late; and twenty miles to Arley's place stretched out like twenty light-years, over the bridge, into the city with its pernicious traffic lights, onto the freeway once

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again, Dan's car now in the lead because he'd located the address on his street map.

We didn't talk much. There were no plans we could make until we saw what was waiting for us. Dan had already prepared Sousa, telling him that Rhoda had been snatched, that it all had to do with *Cupid's Arrow* disappearing, and that there was a lot more to it we'd let him in on later.

The condo development sprawled in and down a hillside, and luckily it wasn't one of the high-security outfits — communal swimming pool with a small recreation hall nearby, maybe a once-an-hour patrolman after midnight, every unit the twin or exact mirror image of its neighbor, two stories, entrance next to the double garage — all very standard. We split up before entering the development, not wanting to look like a convoy, and drove into the circle where Arley lived from different directions. Arley's place, No. 177, showed no porch light, but the upstairs windows were lighted dimly; its two siblings at either side were completely dark — which of course could have meant simply that their denizens were glued to the boob tube. However, Arley's garage was open, and there was a car in it. Dan had parked almost in front of it, and we rolled to a halt across the street. "If that car's Arley's," I said to Janet, "maybe we're in luck. It looks as if the bastard left a space for his little friends. He can't have arrived more than a few minutes ago, and the odds are they'd want to be damned sure he had her before showing up."

Sousa and I got out, leaving Janet at the wheel, with the radio tuned low to a good-music FM station. Dan and Whittington joined us. "Yeah," it's Arley's machomobile," Dan told us. "Let's go on in through the garage like we were his buddies."

We entered, and Dan knocked casually on the door that led inside. We heard footsteps. Finally, a man's voice, a rasping tenor, said something about, "Hold your water. I'll have it open in a min—"

A key clicked. The knob turned. The door began to open — and Dan, using all his weight, burst through it, carrying Arley backwards in his charge. When we came after him, his hands were round Arley's throat, thumbs crushing at his windpipe, and Rhoda's fish-pale, overweight brother was acting as if he were about to have a heart attack.

Dan didn't say a word. Finally, he flung Arley to us like a sack of straw. Sousa grabbed him, twisting an arm behind his back. Arley was choking, gasping, trying to mouth something; and Sousa, applying more leverage to his arm, told him to shut up. Dan had dashed on ahead, and I closed the door, deadbolted it, and told Whittington to cover us in case Arley's guests showed up.

We found Rhoda on a long sofa in the living room, sitting bolt upright, arms hanging at her sides, legs rigidly

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straight in front of her, her features strangely loose, the pupils of her staring eyes dilated like some night creature's. There was a cassette recorder, which Arley had left running. I switched it to rewind, let it run until it stopped, and confiscated the cassette.

Dan was kneeling next to her, holding one of her hands in his, trying with his voice and with his love to elicit some sign of recognition, some response. Distraught, he turned to me. "Commander, oughtn't we get her out of here? Maybe to Janet in the car?"

"Not yet," I told him. "They could show up at any moment, and we'll be a whole lot better off if we can put them out of commission for a few hours — which we can." I went over to where Sousa was holding Arley, and started going through his pockets. Arley didn't like it, and began to squirm. Sousa slapped him in the chops, hard. I found what I was looking for — a drugstore pill bottle — and held it up for Dan to see.

"We're in luck" I said. "Look at this! Arley's name, the doctor's name — Dr. Vlachik — everything. The damned fool!" I put it in my own pocket. "And it's exactly what I thought it would be — the softener-up. The shot's the next step — after that, they blab everything they know. They wouldn't trust this slob with *that.*" I turned back to Rhoda's brother. "Okay, when'll they be here?"

He shook his head. His bruised throat croaked that he didn't know. Sousa went to work again, and he folded. "R-right a-away," he muttered.

"Well, we'd better organize the reception committee. Dan, how'd you like to hide behind Arley's car, where you can get a clear field of fire? Chances are there won't be more than two or three. They ought to be duck soup for your stun-gun. When they knock on the door, I'll open it myself, so watch out you don't get me. Also, we'd best locate the switch for the garage door. We'll want it closed the minute they're taken care of."

Dan stood up, reluctant to leave Rhoda, but recognizing the necessity. Leaning forward, he kissed her, and ever so slightly she smiled. Whittington unlocked the door, took a quick look out. The coast was clear. A moment later, Dan was gone and the door was locked again.

We did not have long to wait — six minutes by my watch. We heard the car drive in. We heard its engine die. We heard its doors open, and voices just outside. Then, in swiftly measured cadence, three times, the low, dull *poof* a stun-gun makes. Dan had done a good job. When I threw the door open, they were still falling. He had shot each of them neatly in the back of the neck, a spot made to order for the stun-gun — it guarantees at least two hours of sack time for the target.

The garage door came down, and Whittington and I went into the garage and started hauling in bodies. Two of them were run-of-the-rattrap goons,

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beefy, ham-fisted. The third was thin and spidery, with that tense, haggard look so many addicts get, and when we searched him he turned out to be Dr. Vlachik. Dan found his hypodermic, all nicely loaded, opened his shirt, and gave him a shot under the skin of his abdomen. "That'll give the s.o.b. something to think about when he wakes up," he said. "I'd love to hear what he'll yak about, and I'll bet anything it's stuff Borg wouldn't want anyone to hear."

I took Arley's pill bottle. I took out one pill. I showed it to him. "Are you going to swallow your medicine like a good little dog — or do we hold you down and force it down your throat?" Whittington, grinning, brought a tall glass of water from the kitchen. "Hold your head back!" I ordered.

Arley tried to wriggle, gave it up, obeyed.

"Way back!"

I dropped the pill all the way back, and Whittington followed it with half the water. Arley had to swallow.

"Now let's take one more precaution," I said, and I fired a tranquilizer dart very deliberately into each of them. "They're very mild," I told Arley. "They'll just make sure your friends hibernate for a couple of hours after stun-gun time. As for you—" I pointed at Rhoda. "—you're going to be like that for quite a while. Dan, give him a light stun-gun shot just to make sure he doesn't do anything foolish like trying to chuck up that pill or phone people before the stuff takes hold."

And that was it. I went outside, and waited in the car until Janet came in sight, driving slowly and casually. I signaled her. We brought Rhoda out. We locked up tidily behind us. "Dan," I said, "I think it'd be wise for you and Rhoda to do on *Owl* what Saul did aboard *Cupid's Arrow* — move in and set up housekeeping. And I mean tonight. Janet can drive there with you, and help Rhoda make it out of this. As I understand it, there's no instant antidote, but there are counteracting agents, and *Owl*'s medicine chest is pretty much complete. I'll have Sousa guarding her apartment tonight, and tomorrow you can move more of your stuff over."

Janet and I took one car, with Dan and Rhoda in the back seat. Sousa and Whittington drove the other. We went by different routes, and arrived at the yard within minutes of each other, and no one bothered us.

I showed Dan what would be their cabin aboard *Owl*, then reported back to Laure, who was waiting, quite unruffled, in her office. I told her what had happened, in detail, and we played that cassette of Arley's. It was disgusting. We heard Arley pleading with Rhoda to help her little brother, just to give him a few useful bits of information, because he was scared, scared to death of what *they'd* do to him; and we heard Rhoda's anguished answers, crying, telling him she had a headache,

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and she couldn't see, and what was *wrong* with her? And when was the doctor getting there? And she couldn't tell him anything, how could she? Because everybody knew — here she laughed crazily — that submarines couldn't fly, they couldn't fly up to the stars. Then she was weeping once again. Then she became completely incoherent. That must've been when we came in, because there was no more.

"Now," I said, "I'd better tell you all about *Owl*'s flight."

"Geoff—" Laure shook her head. "—you've had a long, hard day, and you don't need to tell me anything. Ever since you returned, I've been aboard the ship with Franz and Tammy. They've told me everything — what Gilpin's Space is like, and how wonderfully Saul's drive works, and what it feels like, with mankind still not quite out of the cave, to circle another star. Tomorrow, if you want, you can tell me more. It's been a tremendous day, a memorable day — and not the least of it is that we have Rhoda back safe and sound. Besides—"

I looked at her, and in her eyes I saw the ice and fire of her determination.

"—Besides, we've learned two things about Borg and his crew: First, they're *certain* that we have something that they want. Secondly, they feel more confident, more willing to take risks, but they still don't feel that they can go all out. We're going to have to speed things up, Geoff, even if it means fewer precautions. So far we've been lucky — it's not often a secret so many share stays secret. By this time, Macartney's already taken off for Ireland with his list — a long list — and at this end we're just going to have to go ahead and load everything we can think of aboard *Owl*." She stood up. "Geoff, I can see that you need sleep, and need it badly. Is Janet still aboard *Owl*, taking care of Rhoda?"

I said she was.

"Then why don't you join her there? If Rhoda's going to be all right, she can drive you home, but if she thinks she's going to need more expert watching over, you can both use the captain's cabin." She smiled at me. "After all, the starship *Owl* is *your* command."

IX

Janet and I spent the night aboard *Owl*. She sent me to bed first, staying up until she was sure that Rhoda was coming out of it and could safely be sedated, then joining me — or so she told me next morning, for I was sound asleep the instant I hit the pillow. I slept — and dreamed of Gilpin's Space, that universe of precise, faint, sharply delineated ghosts, and of the world which I knew some of us at least would soon be leaving, with its hordes of power-hungry ayatollahs, political and otherwise, its maniacs, its Whalen Borgs. Nevertheless, I awakened

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rested, grateful that I had Janet there with me.

The next day went well. We held two conferences, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon, both aboard *Owl*, which seemed appropriate. We decided, or perhaps I should say that Laure decided and we went along, that we had to firm up the roster of *Owl*'s crew. Was Tammy Uemura sure his wife would come with us and bring their kid? Was Franz sure his girl down at Stanford would want to give up her teaching assistantship in anthropology to visit stars instead of look at them? And what of Sousa? Dan hadn't briefed him fully, but Sousa had practically told him that he guessed the rest and would be crazy to go along; for a few years, until something to do with depth perception had grounded him, he'd flown charter flights; he sailed single-handedly to Tahiti and down to Suva. He'd be a good man to have with us. Both Franz and Tammy assured us that their girls wouldn't have to be asked twice. As for Sousa, we let the question rest, for there still would be the matter of choosing another crew for *Pussycat*, something that could not be deferred much longer, for the components of her Gilpin's drive already were arriving. I counted four couples so far for *Owl*, Janet and myself, the Uemuras, Franz and his lady, Macartney and his wife, plus four teenage and near-teenage kids, the Uemura's boy and Jamie's boy and two girls. Twelve, plus Laure, made thirteen, which was all right because *Owl* could sleep sixteen or more comfortably. Strangely assorted? Perhaps — but no more so than the complement of *Mayflower*.

For the next three days, work went on, and between working sessions we conferred again and again. We spent Laure's money like water. We bought everything we thought the well-stocked spaceship might require, and loaded it aboard both vessels. Meanwhile, Dan kept a close watch on our warehousemen, and we transferred to other chores one or two who seemed to be too curious.

Nobody bothered us. Arley made no attempt to get in touch with Rhoda, and we simply rode our luck.

On the second day, the newspapers reported that a Dr. Harkis Vlachik had been found dead in a gutter in a ghetto area, beaten to death. The police blamed muggers, but a cold chill went down my spine when Dan showed me the item, and we began to wonder what might have become of Arley.

On the second day, too, Franz's girl, Bess Mayhew, showed up, tall and forthright and athletic, a girl to love and not to trifle with. She and Laure took to each other instantly, which told us more about her than Franz ever had.

On the third day, Laure and I had a long conference with Placek, who quite clearly was starting to understand that something out of the ordinary was going on. She told him ex-

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actly what we had and what we planned, and what we could expect when the IPP moved in against us — as they were absolutely sure to do. When she spoke of space, of actual traveling between star and star, I saw the flare of anticipation and excitement in his eyes.

"In a few days, *Captain* Placek," she told him, "your vessel will no longer be a simple submarine. She will be a spaceship, a starship — the third one of its kind in the history of our Earth. Her new drive's components have all arrived; the last of them, with their associated computers, will be aboard tomorrow, and you will have detailed instructions regarding them. Then, if events erupt too suddenly, it will be up to you. Commander Cormac and I can help you choose your crew. I would suggest that you consider Sousa, but also what of the men who were with you on your trial run?"

Placek frowned. "Latourette and Singer, yes, definitely. Maybe Alwyss. Then there would be my wife and boy. And my — my brother's wife, with her two kids. This isn't just for men?"

Laure assured him that it was not. "You and Latourette can do all the drive installation, or almost all of it, at sea if you have to. Then, if you do need a good, safe place to finish it, I'd suggest Taiwan. You'll have Swiss francs and bullion in the safe. As I've explained to you, Saul Gilpin arranged matters so that the whole world will have the information necessary to duplicate the drive. The IPP in our country and other totalitarian groups abroad will of course do their best to monopolize the knowledge. They will not be able to. Therefore it would be sensible of you to show your crew — whomever you decide to take — that they'll have far more to gain as pioneering astronauts than by betraying you. Captain, I am going to *give* you *Pussycat*. Will you accept her?"

"Good God, *yes!*" Placek cried, incredulous. "But — but there's no way I can pay you for her."

"You can," said Laure. "You can take her to the stars."

I was thoroughly surprised — and disturbed. "Placek's a good man, Laure, a very good man," I said after he had left, "but aren't you putting a hell of a lot of trust in him? Have you thought of what rewards the IPP is going to offer?"

"Geoff, of course I have," she answered. "But I guess you've forgotten, haven't you? Do you remember who his brother was? — the captain of that tanker rammed by a conglomerate vessel three or four years ago. They'd clearly violated the rules of the road at sea, and he tried to fight them in the courts. The IPP railroaded him on a perjury charge, and in prison two of their thugs killed him. The verdict said he was fomenting riot. If anyone can be trusted to work in silence and take *Pussycat* to the stars it's Placek."

I looked at her a little ruefully, thinking that after all the years I should have known better than to

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question the soundness of her judgment. I never dreamed that very, very soon I not only would question it again but would, against her will take the decision into my own hands.

We worked hard, and I slept soundly — so soundly that, when the phone rang at almost 3 A.M. on the fourth night after *Owl*'s return, Janet actually had to shake me awake to answer it. It was Garvey at NavIntel, and sleepily I did what he told me to about the scrambler.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Geoff, for you it's red alert. We just got word here that "Ham" Smithfield's committed suicide. All very tidy and made to order, with a .44 magnum, and in his office, too, leaving a typed suicide note. His confession — how he ratted on Good Ol'-Breck, and how he'd made scads of dinero selling out the IPP. Also, he implicated a few more of Marrone's enemies, the attorney general, for example. And Good Ol' Breck was all prepared. Two hours after they found the body, he'd appointed Marrone to Defense. And you know what that means."

"I can guess," I said.

"Exactly. After that ship of yours disappeared, or got stolen, or whatever, all of us here figured you had *something*, but because subs aren't worth a tinker's damn these days we didn't care. But that's not the way our friend Borg figures it. From now on, he'll be where he can bring the whole national security battering ram down on you — and there'll be damn well nothing I, or anyone else around these parts, can do to help. I'll be expecting my retirement orders anytime now — if I luck out, that is. Give Laure my love."

I thanked him — what else could I say? — and hung up.

"The fat's in the fire," I told Janet. "I've a feeling there'll be no use our trying to get back to sleep."

"They murdered Smithfield, didn't they?" she said. "And now?"

"And now we're going to have to move, and move very fast indeed. Do you want to get breakfast going while I call Laure?"

She slipped into a housecoat, and I woke Laure and told her what had happened. She answered me without a tremor. "I think you and Janet had better get all your things packed, hadn't you?"

"Right," I said, "packed and aboard *Owl* as soon as possible — and not just Janet and I, but all of us. I doubt somehow whether Borg will make his move immediately, but let's take no chances — and incidentally we've got to get Placek off to sea. Probably we can't get him out of here before late tomorrow, but anyhow let's try. He can tell Latourette anything he wants — after all, he'll be the engineer — but maybe he'd better cook up a cover story for the others, at least for now. We'll have to leave that up to him. How close is *Pussycat* to ready?"

"Geoff, she has everything *Owl* has

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except the drive and some of the medical supplies Janet's been bringing in. Anyway, can't Placek rendezvous with Jamie Macartney when you do?"

"Not if they don't have her converted."

"Well, there's enough money aboard to buy them anything they need, either in Taiwan or any other reasonably safe place. Are you going to call the Uemuras and Franz, or shall I do it?"

"Could you call Franz, Laure? Then get him to put through the call to Tammy. The fewer calls I make from here the better. I hate to wake Placek at this time of the morning, but I'm afraid I'd better, so he can pass the word along. But I'm going to tell him not to show up before regular opening hours."

"I think," said Laure, "that that applies to all of us. We can't remain completely inconspicuous, but at least we can make all our activity seem reasonably normal."

I phoned Placek, who understood immediately and said he'd get things rolling at his end. Then Janet and I dressed hastily and ate a hurried breakfast. After that, we spent a difficult three and a half hours selecting things we'd need and things we simply couldn't bear to leave behind: a fragile Sung dynasty bowl, pale celadon, a Royal Doulton kitten, books and diaries, small gifts of love from long ago, a kachina doll Saul Gilpin (of course) had once given us, all sorts of things that seemed utterly nonfunctional — and still essential to our humanity. I was astounded at how many of the really necessary, really useful things Janet had already transferred.

Finally, we felt that we had done our best. We took leave of treasures we couldn't abandon without a twinge, a tear. We drove down to the yard, and found that everyone else was just arriving.

We need not have worried. The day passed, and nothing happened. The work went on. By three in the afternoon, Placek — very much to our relief — had put to sea. In addition to his family and his brother's, Sousa's wife and Latourette's girl friend had been added to the complement. Placek, wisely, had hinted only that there was going to be a lawsuit, and that Mrs. Endicott wanted *Pussycat* well out of lawyers' reach, and that therefore they were going to get a long first-class cruise for free. They were delighted. They knew there'd be some work to do aboard, but they also knew that both *Owl* and *Pussycat* were about as automated as a ship can get, and that nobody was going to have to man the pumps or holystone the decks.

The day passed, and I found myself wishing that we, too, could leave, running on the surface with the tide, submerging far out at sea, then resurfacing at nightfall to enter Gilpin's Space. But Laure, I suppose wisely, would have none of it. She had not packed her things. She alone among us was not ready. In her office, Rhoda kept look-

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ing at her anxiously — Rhoda who for good reason was even more eager than the rest of us to get away.

"You're quite right," Laure said to us. "Speed is of the essence, and you should be ready to leave at a moment's notice. But I am determined to find out what Borg is going to do, for it is I who'll have to give the word to publish Gilpin's data, to send it out by satellite autofax and through all the other channels we've prepared. As you said when you called me, Geoff, Borg probably will not move immediately, and I will tell you why. Because his motive is revenge, against the admiral first, then you and me, it will taste especially sweet if he's back in naval uniform — as Garvey said he surely would be if that man Marrone got Defense. Well, Smithfield has just been done away with; other heads have rolled; Marrone's in. Just wait and see."

And she was right. The work went on. At five, we closed down as usual, but now we went to dinner in two shifts, with all gates closed and locked and Dan's men doubling up at every post. All that night and all the next day we waited. Laure went home as usual, but the rest of us slept aboard. Then, late that afternoon, when Janet had taken Rhoda and Tammy's wife into town for some last-minute shopping, the phone in *Owl*'s control area rang, and I answered it.

It was the nightspot-owning retired CPO, who had served the admiral and served him well. "Commander Cormac?" he growled.

"Yes," I said. "Pat Garrrison?"

"Aye, sir. Commander, a friend of yours just called. He said to give you a message. I got it all wrote down. He said, 'Tell the commander the order just came through. The bastard's back in uniform, reinstated by executive order, all pay and allowanced since he got his board, and the members of the board all censured and dropped a few numbers on the promotion list.' And that's ain't all, sir—" Garrison's voice was outraged. "He's — they've jumped him up to rear admiral!"

"My God!" I whispered.

"Me. too!" Garrison echoed me. "And there's just one thing more. Your pal said, 'Tell Commander Cormac he'd better start counting his minutes now. And I mean *now*,' he said."

I thanked him, and told him how grateful the admiral would have been, and how grateful Mrs. Endicott would be; and when I hung up he was almost weeping.

I went over to the office immediately and gave Laure the news.

She sighed. "Well," she said, "I suppose that means I'll have to get Mrs. Rasmussen to finish all my packing, doesn't it?" She stood up. "Geoff, I'll go home now and attend to it. I'll be back again tomorrow morning."

Both Rhoda and I tried to persuade her not to go, to let Mrs. Rasmussen do all the packing and bring her things down to *Owl* that night or the following morning. She would have none of

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it. "I'm sure that nothing will happen at least until tomorrow,' she declared. "He'll be too busy looking at himself in the mirror in his new uniform. Anyhow, what can he do that we can't counter legally, at least enough to slow him down a little? I'll be here right after breakfast, my luggage packed and ready to take off, so don't you worry, either of you."

She left the office, and presently, out the window we saw her car sweep through the gates and turn off towards the bridges.

"Rhoda," I said, "what the hell is she *thinking* of? She may understand Whalen Borg better than I do, but I still don't like it. With a guy like that, she's plain crazy to take any close chances. Could it be she has something entirely different up her sleeve?"

"Geoff," Rhoda replied unhappily, "I *feel* she has, but I simply can't imagine what, and I'm worried for her. I'm worried sick. She knows we've got to be ready to — to escape — just as — as Dan's explained to me. She told me so herself. *We* are all ready. We're all on edge. But look at *her*."

All of us had dinner aboard *Owl* that night, and all of us slept aboard — all except Laure. We slept anxiously and lightly, armed, alert to every sound, to any hint that there might be trouble at the gates. I'd doze, and wake, worrying about what would have to happen if the morning came *without* Laure, what if she simply disappeared as Rhoda might very well have done if Dan and I had not taken such prompt action. Then what would we do? I would take command, certainly, but would I be justified in ordering the immediate publication of Saul Gilpin's stuff — and in ordering *Owl* and all her people into Gilpin's Space?

X

Morning came — like any other fog-free summer morning — and after breakfast I stepped out onto the dock and looked at *Owl*. She was certainly not beautiful, not as a clipper ship or a sleek ocean liner could be beautiful. Her hull was bulbous, with even that minimum of deck space considered *de rigueur* for submarines broken by her massive control tower, with barely a foot and a half of decking so that you could edge around it. Her viewing ports were like the eyes of a gigantic insect, and her starboard pair of twenty-foot articulated servos — those with which Dan was so fascinated — were folded back into their retaining slots. There was another pair to port and two more forward and two aft, those amidships controlled directly from the tower, those fore and aft from their stations. I knew that when necessary they could accommodate and use all sorts of special tools, but still their huge pincer ends, so terribly powerful, so precise, always made me think of hungry lobster claws.

Owl showed no outward signs of either her capabilities or her journey-

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ings; it was more difficult than ever, not to believe, but to *accept* what had occurred, where she had been, and the whole situation in which we found ourselves. Janet came out and stood there, on the ridiculous little two-foot gangplank, thinking the same thoughts. Then we saw Whittington open the gate for Laure's car and for another following it, and went to join her at the office.

Rhoda was already there, of course; and Laure greeted the three of us cheerfully as she came in. "You see," she said, "nothing's happened yet. But you'll be pleased, I know, to hear that I'm finally packed. All the luggage is in my car and in Mrs. Rasmussen's. You see, she and her daughter and young Keithy are coming with me."

I was surprised, but I couldn't see that any harm was done. *Owl* had enough room for all of them, and Mrs. Rasmussen would be especially useful. Besides, it *was* Laure's ship. "Shall I go tell them to drive down the dock and load the stuff aboard?" I asked. "The boys can lug it in for them and show them where to stow it."

Laure held up a hand. "Geoffrey," she said softly. "Geoff and Janet. And you too, Rhoda. Please sit down. I have something to say to you."

We sat down apprehensively.

"I very much want you to understand what I have planned. The luggage is not going aboard *Owl*. In a few minutes I'm going to start the machinery of disclosure and publication going. Then I and Mrs. Rasmussen and her daughter and grandson will say good-bye to you. Oh, Geoff! I'm too *old* for space. Besides, this was my husband's fight, and now it's mine. I'm *not* giving up."

"God in Heaven, Laure! Have you any idea what you're saying? Have you any notion of who you're up against? You'll not have a chance. They'll butcher you."

Janet added her voice to mine. Rhoda stared silently, in shock.

I pleaded with Laure Endicott. We all did. We tried logic; we spoke of love and loyalty. She remained inflexible.

"I'm not going to try to fight them here, on their own ground," she declared. "In less than two hours, we'll catch a flight for Ireland. *That* is where we and our luggage are going to go. The IPP has made scarcely any headway there."

"And Adolf Hitler had made almost none in Denmark or in Holland when he invaded them, nor the Russians in Latvia or Lithuania or—"

"It is *still* my fight," she stated evenly.

"At least," I said, and I could hear the bitterness in my own voice, "at least you'll come down to *Owl* and say good-bye to all of us?"

"Geoff, dear, I may or I may not. Don't think that I'm not torn by this — I *am*. But now I have to pay my debt to Saul."

We left, Janet and I. Deeply trou-

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bled, we went on back to *Owl*. We told Franz and the rest about it, and they were as disturbed as we.

"She *knows* she's committing suicide," Franz whispered. "She *knows*."

We talked about it, back and forth, getting nowhere; and when the central control area phone rang, Franz answered it.

"For you," he said, handing me the phone. "A woman."

"Cormac here," I said.

"I have a message for you. Please do not ask me who I am or any other questions. It was considered wise to get in touch with you very indirectly."

It was a level, very professional voice, a high-level secretary's voice perhaps, or someone with even more responsibility.

"Commander Cormac, your time is almost up. A federal warrant has been issued for Mrs. Endicott's arrest and for your own. A seizure order has been issued against all her property. A Coast Guard vessel is moving to make sure nothing leaves your yard, and the party that intends to make the arrests is on it way. That party is not composed entirely of federal officers, and it is led by Rear Adm. Whalen Borg."

"*How soon?*" I asked.

There was no answer. She had hung up.

I turned around. I repeated the message just as she had given it. I stood up. "We're going to have to have one more stab at persuading Laure," I said to them. "We owe her that. Janet, get down to the parking lot. Mrs. Rasmussen will still be in her car. Tell her anything you like. Tell her that Laure's in danger, that she's been threatened, that the airline reservations have been canceled, that she's already decided against Ireland. Tell her anything, but get her and her daughter and Keithy and the luggage aboard *Owl*. Hell, kidnap them if you have to. No time to walk. Take the shop car."

"I'll go with you," said Franz. "They'll believe both of us easier than one."

Impatiently, I watched the old Datsun pickup scuttle off. It didn't take them long, and whatever Franz and Janet said was at least effective. In minutes, they were back, with Mrs. Rasmussen's sedan following close behind them. A moment or two more, and an excited Keithy was hauling the first suitcase in.

"We got 'em all! Grandma got Mrs. Endicott's out of her trunk, too. Gosh, I've never been aboard a submarine before!"

I watched until everything had been unloaded and brought aboard. Then I myself drove the sedan back to Laure's office. I went upstairs, and walked in unannounced.

She looked up. "Geoffrey," she declared, "everything's on its way. All Saul's data is now going to every space organization in the world — not just to the professionals, but to the space-oriented groups — you know, younger

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scientists in other fields, science fiction fans. And everything they need to know is going to all the mass media everywhere. Nothing can stop it now! Now I can leave for Ireland with a clear conscience. Now I can fight my battle!"

"*Laure!*" She was so absorbed that I almost had to shout it, to make sure I had all her attention. "Laure, you aren't going! Not to Ireland. Laure, you'd never leave the yard." I told her about the message I'd received. "*Please,* Laure, give it up. Borg will be here any minute now!"

She stood, facing me squarely. "In that case, Geoff, I shall fight them here. I shall fight them in the courts. Ne—" For the first time, just a touch of her native French came through. "—nevaire shall I give up!"

"Laure, listen to reason! Look, we already have your luggage all aboard. Mrs. Rasmussen, too, and Keithy and his mother."

Suddenly, she was furious. "In that case, we will go to the ship together, Commander Cormac, and I shall order everything they brought unloaded and put back in the cars! Now!"

I saw that it was useless to argue with her, useless and time-consuming. I bowed my head, and followed her down the stairs, and I could hear Rhoda coming after us.

She refused to ride. She walked. Perhaps it would be better to say she strolled, taking her time deliberately, defiantly.

She gestured peremptorily to Rhoda to precede us up the gangplank.

And that was when it happened.

Looking down the dock, past the offices, and at the gate, I saw the first of four huge cars turn in toward it. I saw Whittington try to do his job. He stepped out into the open gate, his hand held up.

And the driver of the first car gunned his engine and ran him down, leaving him motionless and broken in the road. And the following cars simply continued over him.

"*Christ!*" I exclaimed. I turned to Laure. "*Now* will you come with us?"

Her face was bloodless suddenly, but her jaw was set. "*No,*" she said coldly. "*Not even now.*"

Then the first two cars were screaming to a stop twenty feet from us. One of the cars following had dropped out to take over the guardpost. Another halted at the offices.

The first car's doors opened and spewed out men. Whalen Borg, in full summer uniform, was coming around the front, an envelope in one hand, a laser pistol in the other. In his car there had been three other men, in the next car five. There were no Navy types among them, and only one had the look of being a federal man, a U.S. marshall possibly. The rest were members of Marrone's private army, all in their monkey suits. All were armed.

It was Borg's big moment, the moment he had waited and connived

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for ever since the admiral had, quite justly, ordered him before his board. He came forward slowly, waving the others back when they followed him too closely. I thought again that he was a man who should never have worn a uniform — any uniform, except perhaps an executioner's. No tailor ever could have fitted him. The naked triumph on his massive face was counterpointed by the dead coldness of his eyes.

Ponderously, he advanced toward us. "Mrs. Endicott," he announced, in a strangly thin, high, raucous voice. "I have a warrant here for your arrest. I have another for the arrest of Mr. Cormac. If you make no resistance, no harm will come to you, though we will for the time being—" He made a gesture to the federal type, who hauled out handcuffs, "—restrain both of you. Now—"

That was as far as he ever got. The upper starboard servo moved. It moved up and out, and down again with the swiftness of a striking snake. Its terrible lobster claw seized Whalen Borg by *and through* his huge neck and chest. It lifted him, grotesquely gurgling. It shook him as a terrior shakes a rat. Then it flung him like a dead rag/admiral doll against his paralyzed retainers. I knew exactly what had happened. I realized that Dan had studied those fascinating servos well — and suddenly I knew that there was only one thing I could do.

I slugged Laure Endicott. I slugged her as gently as I could. I caught her as she fell. Then I pitched her bodily across that two-foot gangplank and through the door and, with the sound of weapons going off wildly behind me, threw myself after her. I pushed the button that ordered the massive door to close. I dogged it shut.

Moments later, we were in Gilpin's Space.

That was the only time in my life I ever slugged an elderly lady, or for that matter anyone of whom I was so deeply fond, and for a time afterwards it was very hard for me to face her.

But weeks later, and two hundred light-years out, when we had found our first water-planet — all green and blue, and richly brown, and white with mountain snows and drifting clouds — she forgave me for it.

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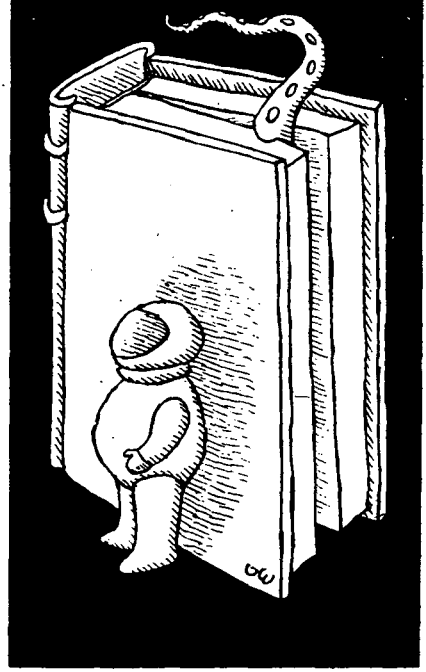
Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Different Seasons, Stephen King, Viking, $16.95

Fevre Dream, George R.R. Martin, Poseidon, $15.95

and various short opinions, plus

Roadside Picnic, Boris & Arkady Strugatsky, Timescape, $2.50

Different Seasons, a collection of four novellas by Stephen King, is an excellent piece of reading. Although one of the stories is little more than a set-piece in imitation of Roald Dahl, and another is most interesting as a gritty documentary on life in a state penitentiary, garnished by a slight and anti-climactic tale of romanticized escape, the other two stories are towering achievements.

One of these is in many ways conventional King horror-fantasy; that is, it gains its effects by concretizing a fantasy so horrible none of us will openly admit we all have it. But Todd Bowen — one of King's patented big-eyed All-American teenagers — does not shrink from the possibilities. When he uncovers the hidden Nazi concentration camp commander and makes him his prisoner, his object is to hear, to his heart's salivating content, what it felt like to have that species of absolute power.

But there are traces in that story of something even deeper, and certainly less cheap. The growing contention between the psychotic golden boy and the utterly rational Nazi reveals tensions and uncovers complexities in the

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human condition that you will not find in *Cujo*, *Firestarter*, or most other King blockbusters. Soon enough, the story degenerates into bang, bang, slash slash, but for a moment — a moment that might cause actual discomfort to readers who take to King as a horse takes to a nosebag — it has trembled on the brink of being painted in something besides primary colors.

The fourth story threw me and continues to throw me, and here is how and why:

In a little Maine town, four boys trembling on the verge of pubescence are living their last summer before they turn into the kinds of shits their older brothers are; before they set foot on the pathways that lead inevitably to being as drunken, shiftless and contemptible as their fathers are. Having learned the location of another boy's body — he was an outsider, wandering alone in the woods, and was killed by a train — they set out to "find" it and claim its discovery.

The actual discovery is made by one of the older boys; shiftless, dissolute, and going where he had no business to be, that boy is constrained from announcing the find. He does discuss it where his younger brother overhears him. So, when the four young boys set out on a journey of many miles overnight along the railroad track, having carefully provisioned themselves, concocted a cover story, and systematically heartened themselves, what they are affirming is not only their superior energy and ingenuity but the power of purity. They are saying that it is not inevitable to succumb to the shot-and-beer joint and the laborer's job; that the despair of their elders is not justified.

Now, I submit to you, folks, that this story, set, incidentally, in the same town as *Cujo*, and beset by the same love/ignorance for cars — King speaks of a "Hearst" shifter, and makes several other trivial but astonishing errors in an area where he flatly claims knowledgeability — I submit to you, folks, that this story is not only literature but major literature, at least in first draft. Furthermore, although it has its flat spots and other problems typical of first drafts, it essentially sustains its pitch throughout. Stephen King is — and obviously long has been — the peer of John Steinbeck and several other guys. I mention Nobelist Steinbeck because he is the one whose work King's "The Body" most resembles, and in some respects — its astonishing ability to depict real adolescents, for one — excels.

These four stories all came about in a curious manner. They are spurts of leftover energy. Each was written immediately after one of King's big novels, and, presumably, was written purely because King wanted to, and hardly cared where, when, and if it would sell. I think there is a major datum — and a cheap shot — in pointing out that the slick, essentially empty fantasy of "Breathing Method"

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is the latest, while "The Body" is the earliest.

There is another datum, and another shot, in pointing out that the narrator of "The Body" — one of the exploring boys — is a storyteller, protowriter, and, in later years, the author of a couple of collegiate literary short stories. These are reproduced within the text of "The Body." The narrator — who turns out to be a rather older man, remembering the events of his boyhood — professes to see them as essentially trivial. Personally, I found the one rather promising and the other funnier than hell, but they're his stories and I suppose he's entitled to judge them. The thing is, you see, this older narrator looking back both on boyhood and on his naive collegiate literary aspirations, has now grown up to be Gordon LaChance, world-famous author of blockbuster horror novels for the mass market, a condition in which he says he is content.

Rather than going on reviewing this book, I would now like to review the money involved.

The initial printing was two hundred thousand copies at $16.95 each. That's three million, three hundred ninety thousand dollars in motion. While not all those copies were eventually sold at full retail, that deficiency was more than made up for by various subsidiary publishing rights sales, potential dramatic rights sales, et incalculable cetera, so we may keep our eye on that three-plus mil in the full confidence that it exists in fact. And, in fact, a great many careers, individual and corporate, were notably affected by faith in its existence, long before Copy One was ever sold.

Affected how? Variously. Here's one area to look at:

Boxed on freight skids at the printer's loading dock, waiting for the trucker, those two hundred thousand copies cost the publisher say $2.50 each. That's half a million dollars. To gross that amount, the printer — actually, he is far more properly called the manufacturer, and "he" is a well-staffed corporation — had to purchase text paper, dust-jacket paper, cover boards, ink, text and jacket engravings, text and jacket plates, camera-ready copy, binding glue, cover cloth, die stamps, foil, cartons, packing material and sealing tape, labels, and label addressing, skid strapping, and overhead, as well as miscellaneous items having to do with processing the job, and, no doubt, a dozen other things I've forgotten. These came from a dozen different sources, and each item represents a purchasing decision, made by one or more purchasing agents, each responsible for holding down costs.

This can be seen as important when one realizes that an increase of one tenth of a cent per unit means a loss to the manufacturer of $2000. So the various purchasers of these outside-supplied materials bite down hard before

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signing anything. They are in the spotlight, and they are significantly either improving or impairing their careers.

Now. Here is a fictitious but plausible vignette: In the medium-sized town where the manufactory is located, at the country club a new member has appeared. He buys bourbon-and-branch for his peers — the VP of the local bank, the biggest car dealer, the owner of the department store, the Chief of Police. The bank VP — the President lives in a mansion on a hill, and is never seen except at annual meetings — may also be the Mayor, presiding over the Town Council, all of whose members are also members of the country club. Who is this new entrant into the circle of power? He is the manufacturer's salesman who got the publisher's order for half a million dollars, and the commission thereon. He is smiling. He has crossed a very tall threshold.

Meanwhile, the nine other salesmen for the plant are taking their families to MacDonald's in their Chevettes.

And, incidentally, the plant took about forty hours to get ready for the job, run it, and strap it into skids. The plant manager, in other words, has in effect filed a report with the corporate comptroller that the plant was making $12,500 gross dollars per hour during those forty hours.

But let us suppose now that each of the ten salesmen had brought in a job order for 20,000 copies of a book each.

Do you see what happens? This is by far the more usual situation. There are ten lots of paper, ten lots of dust jackets, ten make-readies of the presses instead of one, and what with one thing and another it will probably take the plant sixty hours to produce the aggregate of two hundred thousand copies. None of the salesmen join the country club, but none of them are embitteringly deprived. None of the purchasing decisions are high-profile, because the same mistake that cost $2000 on the one book now costs only $200 per any book. Instead, the plant manager — who in the first case only had to make one set of decisions and take a day at the beach — is now the one on the spot.

The estimators at the plant have, of course, weighted their figures to accommodate short-run work. Each of the two hundred thousand copies in this situation costs its publisher say $4.00.* What this means (200,000 x 4) ÷ 60 is that the plant grossed at the rate of $13,333 per hour.

So there are fundamental shifts in responsibility and opportunity, within the same organization, depending on whether *Different Seasons* is being produced or ten other books, adding up to

**Does this tell you* Different Seasons *is priced on the basis of what the traffic will bear? Will you believe these practices subsidize the "good" but slow-selling books produced by the same publisher? If you were an editor fired for buying slow-selling properties, would you still believe it?*

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the same volume, are being produced. Individual lives *are* being changed. We are not dealing with four stories, here, that no other byline could possibly have justified in a first printing worth over three million dollars. We are dealing with something that makes its own universe; typhoon and monsoon, and Stephen King, or Gordon LaChance, sitting in its center.

Incidentally, my estimates are that King will get to keep, after taxes and accountants' fees, about $100,000. Further estimates indicate that's about two years' worth of reasonable household expenses.

About a million dollars of the three-plus will sink into the cost of selling. A million dollars, taking one second to count, align and stack the individual bill, takes 11.57 days to count if you don't take the time to eat, sleep, or write home. On the other hand, although the actual figure must be higher, we can be confident there are at least 1157 people between the loading dock and the retail shelves of this nation. Each of them takes only 14.4 minutes to count his or her share. So now you see why retailers hardly notice what title they're stocking, whereas the wholesalers hammer them to pay attention to individual items, and publishers go into frenzies.

Well, King grosses three hundred ninety thousand and when the Feds are through he has his 100K. The distributers get a mil. The plant gets half a mil. Leaves $1,500,000 for the publisher ... well, somewhere over a mil, anyway, to make room for Miscellaneous, which sometimes in some regions looks like an envelope full of green stuffed through the mail slot of a wholesaling executive's door at midnight.

Deduct overhead, a fierce item since most big-time publishers have to lease an enormous number of square feet in one of the world's highest-rent districts, and in addition the 'phone bills would pop your eyes. Then there's the IRS, and the New York State revenue, and the this, and the that, and the yacht broker, and it becomes possible to see that the three-plus never, ever existed in one green pile in one place in time, and it rarely if ever stood still even in part, and yet the world is made altogether different from what it would have been.

It is therefore not possible to believe that Stephen King's keystrokes hammer no harder than anyone else's, or even that they are essentially the same as anyone else's. Being no fool, he knows perfectly well that he carries a burden few would be capable of carrying and exercises power few possess. Presumably, he draws strength from also knowing few are capable of generating either the burden or the power; looks back on his life and sees where he, like few others, found his way out of the land of lost boys. Or, conversely, found a way to stay when most of us had to do otherwise.

There may be crucial significance in

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that the boy was not struck by the train. He died of fright at the narrowness of his escape. When he weeps, he has no tears of his own. His author has the heavens pour icewater into his upturned eyes. I think I don't know what this means.

Fevre Dream is a historical novel, set in mid-nineteenth century and on the steamboat-crested Mississippi River, about Abner Marsh, would-be shipping magnate, and his partner, Joshua York, a vampire trying to persuade his kind to give up blood. Rich with atmospheric details — excellent minor characterizations and local color, effective descriptions of action that bring the chunk of paddles and the scream of riverboat whistles right into your mind, and so deftly woven together that the sense and feel of the era become absolutely real — it reveals a George R.R. Martin who could do extraordinarily well as a writer of straight novels for the Americana market.

The market he and Poseidon Press* are aiming for, of course, is Stephen King's market.

One can hardly blame them. Yet they approach this project with a curious diffidence, and it may be useful to draw the distinction here between a likely-looking project and a likely-looking book.

A likely-looking book it certainly is; recommended reading, for its richness, verisimilitude, and sheer flow of good prose. Abner Marsh, beset with frustration when his fleet of river packets is destroyed in a cruel winter, rescued from oblivion by the mysterious York's investment of capital to build the luxurious, ultrafast *Fevre Dream* to be the new queen of the river, is a marvelous character in his own right ... cautious, suspicious, tenacious, gluttonous, and headlong in pursuit of his ambitions. On the one side hardheaded as only an 1850s American entrepreneur could be, he is, on the other side, fully possessed of the sort of visionary romanticism that also drove the Goulds and Astors. It's a master stroke on Martin's part to have realized that this is, exactly, the sort of person who *would* go partners with a vampire, and furthermore take up the vampire's cause. Provided that doing so would facilitate his own ambitions, yes, in part, but also because he can recognize and respect the qualities that make York, too, an entrepreneur.

York *is* an entrepreneur. His motive in commissioning the *Fevre Dream* is to gain the means to tour the Mississippi Basin, recruiting isolated groups of vampires to coalesce around him in eschewing human blood, subsisting instead on an elixir of his invention.

Poseidon is Pocket Books, and therefore Simon & Schuster, in light disguise. It used to be Trident. Will it someday republish Samuel R. Delany's Triton*? Will it do only books about boats? Trident's best number was Cene Sloane's book on bicycles.*

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(Another thing Martin does here is verge on making York a patent-medicine salesman, without once letting us realize we could laugh.) We cannot laugh, mainly because York is opposed by Damon Julian, ancient and terribly willful vampire, who may or may not care for blood *per se* — I rather think he does — but certainly cares for his power, which stems from his ability to furnish blood to his followers.

The developing relationship between Marsh and York, with its incidental contacts with other vampires, is a tour de force. Here, you realize, is fat, choleric, headstrong, commonsensical Abner Marsh, gradually entering the social circle of, becoming best friends with, and eventually risking his own soul for, a creature out of superstition. And here is the frail, intellectual York, attempting to bring reason and reasonable solutions to the most emotional of all problems, gradually forging some sort of emotional bond with the Yankee river yahoo, gradually coming to realize that the qualities in Marsh which are the least like those in York are York's only hope of eventual victory over all that Julian represents.

Superimposed on all this, however — rather hastily superimposed in some places, most frequently toward the end of the text — are the obligatory scenes of horror and carnage, culminating in the *Fevre Dream* as a night-marauding ghost ship, prowling the rivers, laden with Julian's vampires and their boatload of victims. These, one would suppose, are what the King audience is presumed to require.

But, (1), I'm not at all sure that this is an exactly right appraisal of what sells King and his colleagues, and (2), *Fevre Dream* is too busy verging on literature to do a good job of its bloodletting.

Just as Poseidon is attempting to market outside the SF genre, yet sending advance copies to SF reviewers, so Martin's book pulls in two — or more — incompatible directions. The horror incidents strung upon the strong and broad carrying power of the plot are, in their almost mechanical order, designed to be incidents in a John Carpenter movie. That is, here is a scene of character revelation, here is scene of river action, here is a scene of horror, here is a scene of character revelation.... One, two, *three*, one, two, *three*.... And assuredly this property would make an excellent horror movie, because the scenario breakdown has all the right things in it at the right time. But Carpenter would move his camera in close on the horror scenes, and cut and edit for maximum shock, whereas Martin pulls back, and Poseidon lets him.

This makes sense in the cause of writing a good book — that is, a book which is about something, as distinquished from a book which is a catalogue of events — because if Martin were to dwell overmuch on each gobbet of mutilated flesh and each freshet of parted veins, no reader could continue

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to think. But King gets around this by not actually having very much ever happen, until the very end, and even then it happens quite compactly and swiftly, if horrendously. King brings you up to it innumerable times, but he doesn't often whip aside the last barrier until the last moment. *Fevre Dream* on the other hand is constantly having it happen ... but with a curious ineffectiveness created by refusing to treat it melodramatically, which means by mistreating it. And I think this is because Martin and his editors as shrewd appraisors of the market are in fundamental opposition to what quickens the juices of Martin the writer.

Martin's book moves, with impeccable internal logic, toward an ending which makes far more sense as literature than it does as drama (if you follow exactly what I mean by the use of two words which are elsewhere synonymous). The typical King book rarely touches on logic as such; paralogically, melodramatically, holding its reader by its carefully selected irrationalities, it eventually delivers its pyrotechnically effective grand climax in a welter of conscious and quasiconscious emotional stimulations. King long ago, apparently, learned something that Martin, among many others, has not yet brought himself to know.

Good book: *The Last Man on Earth*, Fawcett Crest, $2.95, a theme anthology. Edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh, it contains seventeen reprint stories on its perennially intriguing topic.

Fair book: *The Deceivers*, Tor, $2.50, a minor Alfred Bester action novel with many none-too-good interior illustrations, billed as "The True Successor to THE STARS MY DESTINATION." In my opinion, that event has yet to occur.

Keeper: *Roadside Picnic*, Timescape, $2.50. A reprint of Boris and Arkady Strugatsky's *chef d'oevre* about Red Schuhart and his world ... an Earth left forever marked by the landing sites and casually discarded trash of a far superior race, which, apparently, just stopped here one day to stretch its legs, munch a little, and go on about its business.

It's by turns terrifying and amusing as Schuhart tries to make a living by scavenging in the sites. It's ruthlessly graphic in depicting the bureaucracies that spring up in an attempt to regulate humankind's sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic attempt to fathom out uses for alien technology. This book is all the things good SF should be: Adventurous, real-seeming, and about something that bears on matters of importance in the real world. And, if I may say so, it's incidentally the true successor to *Rogue Moon*.

I am so much impressed by and in love with this book that I find myself boiling in proprietary indignation at what are surely some highly question-

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able translating decisions, beginning with the selection of the title. I don't speak more than six words of Russian, but I do know that "roadside picnic," even if a literal rendering of the original, means something far different in the western world of autobahns than it does in the Soviet taiga. I also suspect that "mosquito mange" as a nickname for "graviconcentrate" represents a failure to grasp some idiom, and I sense innumerable other more important nuances lost in what is clearly in places a very quick-and-dirty job.

On the other hand, the Strugatskys continue their inability to do a good job of faking western locales such as Canada or of getting western names exactly right; I find this no worse than charming. On the third hand, the Timescape blurb writer who insists the book is set in the Soviet Union ought to be made to eat a set of galleys.

And on the fourth hand, let neither the authors' funny names nor your awareness of where this story was first created interfere with your reading it as what it is — a terrific piece of reading and, incidentally, one of the masterpieces of modern science fiction.

Collector's Items

The Best From Fantasy & Science Fiction: 22nd Series, edited by Edward L. Ferman, Double day 1977, first edition. Stories by Cowper, Bloch, Reamy, Varley, Tiptree, Russ and others. We have *seven copies only,* in fine condition, signed by the editor. $9.00 includes postage and handling.

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Did you know that in some areas of the country car dealers are reluctant to offer test drives because it is too dangerous for the salesmen? As if Detroit doesn't have enough problems without punks and weirdos coming onto the lot to endanger a fine old American tradition...

Grunt-12 Test Drive

BY
MICHAEL SHEA

I was sitting in the office eating my lunch when the customer came onto the lot. He was an overweight individual, bald, and very much in a hurry. He came straight back to my office, where my door of course stands wide open ten to ten seven days a week, but he didn't actually come inside. From outside where he was standing, he said:

"Let me see the fastest thing on the lot."

Well naturally I put down my sandwich. "You say you're shopping for speed?" I asked him. "You're shopping for high-caliber performance with maximum handling ease? Sir," I told him, "call it a hunch or sensation or what have you, but I feel we are going to be able to satisfy your vehicle needs."

"Show me the fastest thing on the lot, you idiot, *now!*" the customer shouted.

"Well now, just a moment, sir," I responded. "I don't like your implying that I'm an idiot."

"Listen," he said. "My time is short. Rise. show me. If the car suits, I'll pay you twice its price in pure gold on the spot — just let it show some speed on the test drive."

I saw no point in a lengthy discussion. I got up and took him over to the east side of the lot (we're just eight miles south on the Sanyany and speedway, close to the Greater Lumbudgian Basin open week *and* weekend nights to ten.). As we walked through the lot I noticed a great deal of perspiration oozing out of the customer's shiny head, which was bald as I indicated, even though it was a just slightly hot afternoon.

"I see you're a heavy perspirer," I remarked. "So is my wife. She goes

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through four blouses a day in August. Now the Grunt-12 which I intend to show you has factory air with a thirty-year Alpine Freshening Filter."

'Can't we walk faster? Where is it?" the customer asked.

"Just ahead," I said. "You've got to realize that we've got 600 acres of vehicles here, which simply means that our volume alone guarantees you both unbeatable selection and unbeatable prices."

The customer didn't say anything. We arrived at the Grunts, and he went to the nearest, which happened to be a twelve, and said "This one. I want to test drive it."

"Now that is the twelve excelsior," I said, but before I could go on the customer had whipped out a kind of leather poke with pull-strings, and poured me a palmful of little square chips of pure gold which must have weighed altogether a good pound and a half, and was so pure it rubbed off on my fingers. I had to hurry to jump into the car, as then he was already in it and beating on the horn, which was luckily set at low. So I got in beside him and gave him the key. He fired up those sixteen big ones — which only Grunt Motors knows how to make — and the Grunt took off.

I mean to say literally that it took off. It jumped straight off the lot and onto the street, in the process plowing through one of the posts that held up my canopy of red-and-white plastic windflappers. Now as that pole went down, the windflapper canopy got snagged on our rear bumper, causing us to be trailing a whole two-acre section of the canopy when we hit the street, which we drove straight across, and then across the lot next door, which was vacant in those days, then up the embankment and onto the speedway. Within two seconds of touching rubber to asphalt we were doing better than 300, still dragging those red-and-white windflappers like a tail a good block long behind us. The customer was standing on the accelerator and pulling against the wheel for added leverage.

As we passed 350 the canopy snapped free of us, and collided with a Bulger Dauphine that was just then pulling up behind us to pass. The Bulger was literally buried or swallowed up by that canopy, causing the startled driver to swerve through the guardrail. The vehicle looked like it was on fire with those red-and-white windflappers as it dove off the edge.

It was after lunch, so I slid out the bar and set up a couple of stiff doubles. I drank both of them because the customer ignored his entirely. He wasn't watching just the road, I noticed, but kept scanning round over the landscape to either side of the speedway. We'd leveled off around 450. The knobs of the lane dividers sounded like buzz saws under our tires. We were out of the city on the open highway and the traffic was strung out more or less in well-separated clusters. Most of

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those cars weren't making much more than half our speed, so it was like they were standing still. But the customer did the fanciest kind of maneuvering among them without even letting it distract him from watching the hills. I had another quick double, and then I noticed something.

It was because I remembered the air-conditioning. I looked to see if the customer was still perspiring, and sure enough he was, but I noticed something else, too. The customer had a silver earring in his earlobe which I had not seen up to that point.

Now in all frankness, say what you will about life-styles, say what you will about rights, or even about weirdo crime, for that matter. The fact still remains: many aspects, practiced by many people who I'm sure are decent, hardworking people, are simply more unusual than certain other ones; and therefore, on a smoke-and-fire basis, I don't mind saying that I got very much alarmed when I discovered this silver earring in the customer's earlobe. Just then we came up on the Sanyany junction, and the customer swooped across nine lanes to the transition ramp.

The curve of that ramp is very sharp and our Grunt dove into it at the full 450. We took the whole ramp with two wheels on the pavement and two against the wall, and with an added acceleration like from a sling, we roared down onto the Sanyany at near 500. An elderly couple was easing a rattly old four-door Sneezer onto the Speedway ahead. We passed them at 515, such that our wind blew their Sneezer clear off the road and over the embankment.

"Now there's a problem you'll never have with a Grunt-12," I said. "They're individually hurricane tested, so you, the purchaser, can go anywhere at any time with confidence." I was all this time extremely uneasy about that earring. At any moment, I felt, this man might do something insane or irresponsible, and if such a situation developed, just where would I be? Right in the middle of it, of course.

But years of experience dealing with the public have taught me the value of keeping calm. So I kept everything on a casual level, in spite of my worries. "Offhand," I went on casually, "Just where would you have in mind to drive to?"

"Drive to?" asked the customer, like he was surprised. Then he smiled, still all the time watching the hillsides and road ahead. "We are driving to a window, my friend," he said. "If this car gets us there I'll pay you twice its value. That there *is* a window in this area is certain, and it should remain manifest for at least another hour."

"Frankly, sir, I don't follow you entirely," I said.

"But if you *were* following me," he said, smiling what I considered to be a very nasty little smile, "then you would be leaving this world forever within the hour — this glum little box of a world!"

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"Well I can't really agree with you there," I said. "I have to say that this old world's been pretty darn good to me as long as I rolled up my sleeves, looked at the positive aspects, shouldered my responsibilities and pitched in."

"You know less than nothing," the customer said. "You have never even heard the name Sakka Thorss, or of Yodane Five-Shored in the Zamber Gulf. Spare me your views."

He stayed more or less at 500 now, which involved some truly remarkable steering when we came up on the clusters of traffic. We were whipping so tight around other vehicles that some of the lighter ones were yanked two to six lanes sideways by a kind of whiplash effect of our curving slipstream. We slung one particular vehicle, a little yellow Torch, six lanes sideways and underneath a huge ten-axle that was hauling a block of houses in the right lane.

That Torch skated straight between the truck's third and fourth axles and climbed the embankment on the other side. It plowed a ways through the ivy on the embankment, hugging the slope like a roach on the wall, then gunned it back down the embankment, shot between the truck's seventh and eighth axles, slid out to its original lane, and took out after us.

"Philosophically, I'm not a believer in imports," I said. "Basically, I believe that we make the best vehicles in the world right here at home. Still, I have to say that little Torch pursuing us right now is doing some real maneuvering. He seems disturbed as a result of our blowing him under that truck."

"Bah!" said the customer. "The smallest act reverberates endlessly through the chain of cause and effect. Consequences are uncontrollable. I attend only to my business — maximum acceleration!"

"Well, in my way of thinking," I said, "there's no two ways about the acceleration this Grunt has been giving us. I am honestly myself amazed by it. May I ask, do you travel at these speeds in your line of work?"

"Only for this occasion," he said. "Windows are visible only to swiftly moving observers. Moreover they are terribly short-lived."

That Torch was really hanging on. I saw it swinging through each cluster we put behind us, and it always seemed to come out a hair closer to us. "I have to say," I said, "that Torch is really trying. I'm sure it's already past its factory maximum — so are we, in fact. But the Torch could just never catch us. It's that simple. It just doesn't have those sixteen big ones pounding away to give us power, performance, and increased driving satisfaction. It can't quite close the gap. Let me switch the rearview to telescopic for just a little added viewing convenience. Did you notice this feature?"

The customer hardly looked up at the ten-power wide-angle Miralenz, but then he did a double-take, looked

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again, squinted at it, and blurted out a horrible screech.

Naturally I myself looked in the rearview again, but only for a glance, as my personal opinion is that when a vehicle is doing anything over 150, then at least one party should be observing the road at all time, and the customer wasn't. All I saw was that it was a young lady driving the Torch, which was last year's and needed a wash, and which was missing the plate and a left headlight.

The customer shouted at the mirror like it was someone in front of him. "Fiends split you ass-wise!" (Those were his exact words.) "I killed you in Lar, on the bogs. I saw the fogwraiths spring the ambush, and the mud-nymphs clawing at your legs!"

Meanwhile we were coming up on another cluster. The tail-end vehicle, an immaculate Harrumph Omega, was in our lane, doing little better than half our speed and, as I say, the customer wasn't doing any steering. I reached over and set the horn for "Traffic Adjustment," the supersonic range that gives a medium-size boom. I gave it a blast. It lifted the Harrumph high enough so we had time to drive under it, and moreover cleared the lane for us through the rest of the cluster.

"Did you notice the feature I just made use of?" I asked the customer. "It's just this kind of feature that allows Grunt Motors to say to you, the purchaser: 'With a Grunt you're not just buying a car — you're buying the road.' "

I didn't go on because the customer was not listening. He was watching the road, and the rearview, equally. His eyes were either extremely wide open or actually bulging and, as to his perspiration, his head didn't have it in streams now, but instead like a smooth coat of varnish. I turned the air-conditioning higher, worried again about overheating and that earring. But then he spoke, very calmly.

"Listen," he said. "We are in danger. My sister pursues us. If she reaches the window before we do, it is lost to us. A single crosser exhausts a window's power and seals it up. If I lose this one, I must wait 197 years before another is scheduled anywhere in this scabrous world. You must help me now to scan for the window. Your sale rides on it."

"I think I can safely say," I said.

"Fin," he said. "The window will appear as some small turbulence in the air, a dust devil, a heat shimmer, a gust of dead leaves across the hillsides. This road runs roughly through the center of the window's zone of probable appearance, which, though only a mile wide, is unhappily over 300 miles long."

"Of course I'm happy to help," I said, "But I see it more as humorous than anything. I know they talk about pep in these imports...." I didn't go on because he wasn't listening again. He was making back-and-forth calculations, between the Torch in the rearview, and the traffic cluster we were now coming up on.

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We entered the cluster and pulled a good three-quarters through it, to where the Torch would just be entering it. Then the customer whistled, and black soot poured out of our tailpipe, huge clouds of it that swallowed up all twenty lanes of the speedway behind us. It was an oily, glistening soot, and it was jammed with huge black bats as fat as pigeons and as thick as locusts, that swarmed through the fog like a blizzard. We could just catch the sound of their thudding against the traffic in the fog — along with some even louder sound effects, as we put the whole cluster behind while still trailing the smoke. Then the customer whistled again, the smoke had stopped dead, and in just a second was a black cloud bank far back of us.

We had to switch the rearview to 100-power before anything came out of the cloud bank. Then a chopped Snolt with quad bossers, razzles on all four coins, and cocked spirits for added torque (all these features covered with jet black, of course) came sliding sideways out of the cloud. It turned through a slow circle as it coasted forward, and as it swung to face us we saw that there was that Torch, pressed side to side with the Snolt, locked in the same sliding spin.

At our rearview's limit they came front-first to the road, and the Torch gunned dead against their spin. It peeled itself right off that Snolt, so to speak, left it stopped on a dime but spinning faster than a fan blade. Meanwhile the Torch itself was already getting bigger in the mirror, black as soot with its wipers slogging grease, with a dead bat snagged on one wiper blade and some others plastered against the grill.

"Seriously," I said, "I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. A Torch would have to go fifty percent over its factory maximum just to keep up with us, and this one is actually *gaining* on us!"

The customer didn't answer. He studied the speedway and the hills, and his breath was very harsh. Also, his eyeballs were bulging now for a definite fact — swelling a little when he inhaled, and deflating when he exhaled. Before I could become disturbed by this, it began to rain bricks all around us. The customer turned on the wipers.

The bricks danced and bounced on the speedway. Some came skidding off our hood and smashed to red dust against our twenty-ply Panascan windshield, and the wipers slung the dust to either side like they do spray in a real rain.

In mere seconds our tires sounded like they were being jackhammered or crossing land mines, what with the heaps and drifts of bricks starting to cover every lane. I thanked the stars that our tires were Juggernauts, with ninety-piece skeletons of spring steel, and the Bio-Tread shells that heal themselves of major damage if you give them an hour's rest in the dark of your trunk.

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We'd already slowed to 350 with the constant crashing of bricks. They were hammering so thick and fast that our whole chassis felt like it was being ground to nothing by the walls of a too-small tunnel. All the windows were full of cracks and the Panascan had got so many bad ones in it that it was spitting glass now as the bricks hit it.

Then they stopped hitting it, because, as I just then realized, the wipers had risen to such a speed they weren't even a blur, and the wind they put out had begun to wedge aside the bricks. Almost as soon as this happened, the bricks stopped raining completely.

We returned immediately to top speed, but were no longer getting the smooth, quiet ride the Grunt is world-renowned for. Our tires made a very disturbing singing sound while the wipers, still invisible, were howling. The customer was looking all around the landscape, which was fractured-looking with the cracks in our windows, and at the same time he kept checking the rearview.

"The hag's not behind us," he said. "She's turned off, I'm sure of it. She's tricked us into passing it."

I did not say anything, due to the customer's obvious tension. I reached over and turned off the wipers to ease our ears. The customer shrieked, and swerved across twelve lanes, went straight through the guardrail of the speedway, sailed through a sixteen-foot fall to the hillside beyond the embankment, and began plowing straight up the long green slope towards a hilltop a couple of miles off — all without losing more than ten mph. The wipers stopped, and to my astonishment all that was left of them was two stubs, shorter than my thumbs.

It was a long steep upgrade through grass a yard deep. The windows on both sides were blotted out by the green juice that we kicked up like speed-boat wash. Up ahead, near the hilltop, I noticed a dust-devil, which is like a tiny cyclone of dust that will run across a field or road. As we didn't gain on this one, it was obviously moving toward the hilltop itself.

"I notice up ahead there is a dust devil," I told the customer, "which you might call an atmospheric disturbance, or a small turbulence. Maybe that's the window we're looking for."

He didn't answer. He was again gripping the wheel for leverage, and moaning as he pressed the accelerator. We held full speed, though I must say our shocks were not performing outstandingly. The devil wind stopped at the hilltop, because it hung there while we began gaining on it very rapidly.

"Well I'll be darned," I said, "if I don't see that little Torch — just crossing the slope of that next hill there!"

He didn't even glance over, and the Torch vanished behind the hill we were climbing. We were now a quarter-mile from the top, and the dust devil suddenly changed. It stopped looking like a dust whirl and instead looked just

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like a piece of night sky, a blackness with stars, but having the same wiggly, jittery outlines to it that the dust whirl had had. This little piece of night sky just danced there above the hill.

We were barely a hundred yards downslope from it, when there came that Torch in a leap up from behind the hill. It looked like one of those porpoises jumping from the water in our own exciting Marine Arcades in Coastal Sanyany. That Torch roared up so high we could count the treads on all four tires, and then it dropped into that dancing patch of night sky just as neat as a half-dollar might drop into some individual's pocket, and suddenly there was nothing up there on the hilltop but the blue sky, while the customer beside me made a frightening sound.

We ourselves should have launched pretty high off the hilltop when we reached it, but surprisingly, the instant the customer howled, our Grunt turned to so much dead weight, and we skidded to a full stop right at the top of the hill.

I decided I would get out and stretch my legs but, as it turned out, I did not seem able to do so. After a few moments the customer said:

"One hundred ninety-seven years. One hundred ninety-seven years under your dismal sky. One hundred and ninety-seven years."

"I want to be open with you, sir." I said to him. In all truth, he looked at the very least fifteen pounds lighter than he had when he walked onto my lot about fifteen minutes before. "By that, now, I don't mean ninety-nine percent open," I said, "as a lot of people tend to mean when they say open. I mean 100 percent open."

"And when I finally return," said the customer, staring at me, "that hag will be supreme in Sakka Thorss. In the capital or anywhere within 600 leagues of it, my life will not be worth two shovels of Rounce crap. Thus I will be again an exile in my own world, farming revolts among the doltish fringe-primitives, and skulking to kindle mutinies among the irascible giants of the bogs. Even now my sister is being reinstated as Prime Theatrix, for the feat of return from exile confers full pardon and restoration of rank. Sole management of the public spectacles — two centuries with my co-rule! She will know how to use such power. But first, this preliminary boon! First this rancid prologue to those greater woes! First I must pass 197 years *here*."

"Well sir, as I say," I said to him, "I want to be 100 percent open. I am certainly not saying that negative occurrences never occur, that discouraging situations do not occur, that what you have does not occur or never occurs. But let's face it. The ups and downs are part of the merry-go-round ride. Sure, you avoid the holes in the road, and you have top-quality shocks installed in your vehicle by a responsible dealership that will stand behind their work with warranties. But no matter what you do, you are going to sooner or later hit that bad pothole, or that nasty

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crack in the pavement, and you are going to take a knock. Now my question to you, sir, is just this: Should we let this give us a sour and bitter viewpoint of the world? Should we let this make us just throw in the towel, take it lying down and write off the whole ball game? Well, I kind of think I know your answer to that one, sir. And let me assure you that there *is* a bright side to your present situation. Because I think that if you were to settle right here in the community of Sanyany, that in less than a month you'd come back to me and you'd say to me: 'Mr. Wheeler, it's as simple as this — I was 100 percent mistaken to condemn this fast-growing community, which now, quite frankly, I think is a community not only of today and right now, but also a community of the future and the years ahead as well."

The customer just looked at me. He stared at me for a long time, and I had the genuine feeling that I had reached him, that he was seriously thinking over my advice to him. That's what I've always liked about dealing with the public, is precisely that kind of moment of true communication. And after he'd looked at me a while he said:

"I will in fact settle nearby, in these hills somewhere. I will build a cell seven miles underground. There I will stay, sealed in until I have committed to memory all of Parple's *Collected Pandects.* It will take at least 190 years."

"Well, then," I said, "Let me welcome you aboard here in Sanyany. The way we Sanyanians feel about it is that another neighbor is just another friend."

"Your machine failed its test-drive," said the customer, "but I've decided to buy it, if you can be hired to drive it for me."

"Well, this is an unusual proposition," I replied. "I've got to mind the store every day as they say, and we're open—"

"I would require that you drive only one night of every seven," the customer said, "from dusk until dawn. I will equip the vehicle to scan for embrions of uncharted windows — they sometimes occur in the zone of a charted window, as a kind of aftershock. You need only steer the vehicle over the hills, and the scanner will act on its own."

"I see," I said. "And what would be the salary?"

"It would be two-fold," said the customer. "For each night's work you would receive the sum of gold presently in that compartment." I opened the dash box and there was a heap of those gold chips in it that must have weighed five pounds. "Secondly," said the customer, "if you undertook this post, then for as long as you executed it faithfully, each week, you would not die — death would have no power to approach you. But you must miss no night, for a window matures from an embrion in less than fourteen days."

I hesitated a moment, as anyone

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might. But then I did what I've never regretted in all the years since: I indicated that his offer was highly acceptable.

Of course when I got out of the car at last to stretch my legs, and saw the condition of the car, I quite frankly had no hopes of ever driving it anywhere, whatever the wages. To name just one aspect, we had actually worn through both the tires *and* the wheels, to the axle-ends, and furthermore, these were themselves ground to very sharp points.

Since then, you can be sure I've learned to better appreciate the full capacities of the Grunt-12. You take the new Whoom, the Dire Wolf, the Kabash — I handle them all, and they are fine automobiles. But I will never stop saying it: they ought to re-issue the Grunt-12.

Every Saturday night for the last ninety-nine years and nine months, I climb up to that same hilltop, where that indentical Grunt-12 sits. In all that time I have never spent one cent on parts, labor, or even *fuel* for that vehicle. And every Saturday night, I climb into it, and turn that key, and it turns over perfectly, ready for action. I pull off the brake, throw it into gear, and step on the gas, and away I go.

Performance? It doesn't ride, it *flies*. All night long it can barrel-roll over the hills, do ninety-degree lateral breaks from vertical speed-of-sound dives. It can loop the loop, do single-fin easy-overs, even hover on updrafts.

Extras? The Panascan seems to have an infrared range, and I can see ground squirrels in the weeds on hills a hundred miles away. The radio picks up every sound from the same range — I hear the couples parked on Lookout Drive, a rabbit being torn to pieces by an owl, even the ants in their tunnels.

Nothing stops it! Absolutely no kind of weather condition affects the ride — gale winds, hail, blizzards of dead leaves! I can steer it effortlessly through lightning storms, across the flanks of a hurricane, through downpours of pitch-dark rain....

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From the late Susan Petrey, here is the fifth and penultimate story about those remarkable healers of the Russian steppe called the Varkela.

Small Changes

BY

SUSAN C. PETREY

Spareen the Varkela leechman cleaned his scalpel in the boiling water and moved away from the fire toward the thick felt wall of the nomad yurt, where his patient lay wrapped in a sheepskin blanket. Around the fire pit the Nogai Tartars squatted, watching suspiciously, one of them smoking tobacco in a small silver pipe. Cold, gray evening rain pelted the yurt, sometimes entering the smoke hole in the roof to hiss in the fire pit.

Spareen motioned to the Tartars.

"If two of you will hold him, I'll dig that musket ball out of his leg now."

He peeled back the sheepskin, raised the hem of the man's robe and two of the Tartars, with small mutterings, came and held their comrade as Spareen began to probe cautiously in the wound. The bleeding burst forth again, bright arterial blood, as Spareen's scalpel ticked against something hard. With a quick movement of his wrist, he flicked the bit of lead onto the Turkish carpet and applied pressure to the wound. The cloth rapidly darkened with fresh blood, and Spareen's needle-thin, hollow blood-teeth slipped involuntarily out of the small niches in his upper jaw. One of the Nogais gasped and pointed at the exposed were-teeth.

"You needn't worry," said Spareen. "Varkela never take blood from a sick person. If I save his life, I'll take some blood from one of his relatives later in payment. I don't know what superstitions you've heard about my people, but be assured I am not a walking dead or vampire."

This near the Russian settlements, some Tartars had forgotten the ways of the Varkela, known as bringers of healing to their ancestors. And well they might forget, for his people were a rarity this far west of the Volga.

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The flow of blood seemed to abate. Spareen pulled back the cloth and observed that clotting had begun to take place. He bent low over the wound and gave the area a quick swipe with his pink, doglike tongue. The last seepage stopped. A good trick that, thought Spareen, noting the amazed look from the Nogais. He deftly bandaged the area and returned to the fire. Now, if the fellow had not lost too much blood, he would recover and Spareen would earn his much-needed payment. His veins ached hollowly for the blood-price, as the showing teeth had betrayed.

"If it's not too much trouble, I could do with a bit to eat," said Spareen, hoping to quell one hunger by feeding another. He knew that it was often good practice to fill one's belly in the presence of outbloods. It seemed to affirm a common bond and made him seem less mysterious to humankind.

After a bit of bustling about the stewpot they offered him meat cooked with buckwheat groats and gravy — horsemeat! His gorge rose in his throat at this horror, until he realized that they in truth did not intend it as an insult, but were probably unacquainted with the ways of the Varkela, and reduced to such straits by their poverty. He declined their hospitality, choosing his words carefully so as not to offend:

"Just as you who are followers of the prophet abstain from pork, so I am constrained by my religion against eating the flesh of the horse." Religion was not the exact reason, but it sounded convincing.

He bid them good evening and passed out the leather door flap of the yurt, hearing them answer, "Many smiles," as was their custom.

The golden-eyes mare was waiting for him, calmly pulling at cottony milfoil that grew in profusion by the yurt. From his saddlebags he offered her a handful of corn, which she eagerly gobbled up.

"Not too much now. You'll get colic," he warned.

"Me overindulge?" she snorted, in the horse language that only the Varkela understand. "That's your vice, not mine."

She tried to catch in her teeth the wine flask that hung from his belt, but he was too quick for her, snaring her head in the bridle so that all she got was cold steel between her teeth.

"You're a nuisance," he said, hiding the disputed wine flask in a saddlebag. "You can't stand the idea that somebody might be having a good time."

"What I can't stand is carrying your inebriated carcass home in the morning," said the mare. "What if a wolf should come along? I rely on the fellow in the saddle to haul out his flintlock and protect me."

"If a wolf did come along, and I were as drunk as you always imply, he'd smell my breath and faint," Spareen chuckled, tightening the girth.

The golden-eyes mare heaved a heavy horse sigh as he slung his phar-

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macopoeia of herbs over the saddle and vaulted into place on her back.

"If you can't make a large change in your behavior, you might consider at least making a small one," she suggested, as she set out through the tall grass of the steppe for his next patient.

"Either drink less, or drink something less potent," she advised.

"I'll give the matter due consideration," said Spareen.

As they slogged along a wagon track, the rain increased, pouring a deluge over the steppe, making a creek of the road. Water rolled down Spareen's thick wool burka to soak his white doeskin trousers at the knee. What a miserable night to be out making his rounds. Better the pothouse in one of the sleepy little Cossack villages along the Terek. There he might buy a taste of something stronger than wine to ease the hunger of his were-teeth, might even snare a wench to warm his belly-fur, if he felt so inclined, and if he could convince his nose to accept the stench of an outblood woman. Any excuse would do to get out of this never-ending downpour.

It was then that he saw six white, bubble-shaped mounds poking up from the steppe like puffball mushrooms, the yurts of Kalmuck Tartars. This would be as good a place as any to wait out the rain. And perhaps he could drum up a few patients.

Spareen urged the mare off the wagon road into the high feather grass, which painted wetness on the cuffs of his doeskin britches. He reined in at one of the dwellings and called out the traditional greeting of his people:

"Does anyone here require healing?"

An orange gap opened in the night as a felt flap was pulled back. Black shapes, silhouetted by a triangle of fire, observed him.

"Welcome, stranger," one of them called.

Spareen dismounted and ducked his large body through the opening.

"I am Zebek," a flat-faced, snub-nosed Kalmuck addressed him. The fellow wore a pillbox hat from which a queue hung down the back, and was dressed in a dark-blue, padded jacket, with frog-buttons, that hung to his knees. Under this he wore the baggy trousers of a horseman of the steppe. Kalmucks! — what a bit of luck to stumble on one of their settlements. They were usually found farther east, and Spareen's father had had his practice among these hardy folk in his keep beyond the Volga. Nogais out here had forgotten much, but Kalmucks had migrated in a much more recent wave, and would therefore know what manner of beast a Varkela was.

Spareen settled to the thick felt floor of the yurt and began to shed his wet clothes in layers.

"If I might sleep here a while, I can repay you. My camp is somewhat distant, and I am wet to the bone." He

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pulled the furry shapka from his head and rung out the water to show the truth of his word.

"No need for payment," said Zebek. "It is our custom to take in the sojourner and the stranger within our gates."

An odd speech for a Kalmuck, thought Spareen, and he was briefly reminded of the quaint-sounding phrases of a Nogai Tartar quoting Koran. But the Kalmucks were Buddhist of the Tibetan school, and perhaps this was one of their sayings, although he'd never heard it before.

Zebek, who looked to be about forty, moved some bedding toward Spareen to make a place for him to stretch out. Two children, a boy and a girl, huddled close by the fire, and a young girl in her teens, apparently the eldest daughter, sat cross-legged, sewing while the mother leaned over the fire, stirring something in the kettle.

Spareen shucked off his white doeskin shirt and scratched at his fur-covered belly. This seemed to fascinate the teenaged girl who stared at him with slant eyes almost round in curiosity. She put out a hand as if to touch, but her father stopped her with a curt word. Probably never saw a Varkela without his shirt before, thought Spareen, gratefully covering himself with a dry blanket. He pulled out his wine flask and offered it to his host, who sat on his haunches observing Spareen through slitted eyes.

The Kalmuck sniffed at the flask and then placed it to his lips and upended it, taking a long pull. He handed it back to Spareen, who drained it and then held it upside down over the fire to show it was empty. The lord of the domicile reached for a bottle that hung from the pole frame of the yurt, containing a clear fluid that Spareen at first thought was water, until Zebek uncorked it and Spareen smelled arrack, a potent brandy distilled from fermented mare's milk. They passed this bottle back and forth for a long while — it was throat-burning stuff but it cheered the belly, and soon Spareen was feeling warm and sleepy. He wasn't sure of the exact moment that he drifted off — he had a vague recollection of someone pulling a blanket over him — and then he slowed his heart and breathing and settled into that deathlike state that passes for sleep among the Varkela.

He awoke to find himself on his back lying in the tall grass a little ways away from the yurt. The sun was sitting like a bright orange ball on the western edge of the steppe. Great bloods and butterflies! He'd slept the whole day, and it was again time for him to begin a night's work. He sat up and saw Zebek's eldest daughter coming towards him carrying mare's milk in a soft leather sack. When she saw him she dropped the bucket and screamed. Spareen cast his eyes about the ground expecting to see a snake but found none. When he looked again, he saw the stout figure of the mother

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brandishing the cast-iron cook pot. This descended on his head with a resounding crack and he faded again from consciousness.

When he next opened his eyes, he found himself securely tied, with sturdy ropes cutting into his wrists and ankles. His head throbbed painfully. By the stars Spareen judged it to be about eight o'clock in the evening, if he had not lost another day. Zebek was squatting nearby, engaged in stretching a sheep hide on a frame. He looked up suddenly, apparently drawn by Spareen's stirring, reaching into his shirt and pulled out a talisman on the end of a string and held it toward Spareen, saying:

"Be still, demon!"

The talisman twinkled in the light from the fire that shone through the door flap — and it was then that Spareen recognized the cause and the seriousness of his situation. A cross with a slanted crosspiece at the bottom — a Russian crucifix — dangled at the end of the string.

Spareen shrank back from it as far as his bonds would let him, for in his religion this was "the sun's hammer," an unlucky sign similar to the "evil eye." He averted his eyes from it as much as possible, for to look at it would increase his bad luck — not that it could get much worse, he thought. These Kalmucks were apparently converts to the Russian Orthodox religion, having little knowledge of their former relationship to the Varkela, and having fallen heir to the usual Christian prejudice against the "Children of the Night."

Zebek's stout wife poked her head out of the door flap, the firelight gleaming on her oily features.

"The corpse wakes again," Zebek informed her, and Spareen realized they were speaking of him.

"I was not dead, only sleeping," he said. "I am a Varkela leechman, not a corpse. Our sleep is different from yours. If you have any illness among your horses, your sheep or yourselves, I shall try to cure it free of charge to prove to you my benign nature." He was careful not to mention what his fee would have been.

"We will let the priest decide what manner of creature you are. He visits this encampment once a week to hold service," said Zebek. His knuckles whitened as he tightened the tanning frame.

"And when will that be?" asked Spareen.

"In four days." Zebek propped the taut frame against the side of the yurt.

"You might offer me something to eat,' said Spareen. "It's been two days since I last filled my belly."

"Does a demon eat?" asked the wife.

"I don't know about demons," said Spareen, "but I am Varkela, and we most certainly do eat."

Zebek's wife stared at him doubtfully, then went back inside. She returned with a helping of lamb on a

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wooden plate. With a large serving ladle she offered him overlarge, steaming mouthfuls, which he licked up as best he could, burning his wolvish tongue, but not complaining for fear she might stop.

The plate was soon empty, but Spareen, being a big fellow, probably outweighing both Zebek and his wife, voiced a hope for more, and received it in great measure. At least they didn't intend to starve him. Madam Zebek seemed to enjoy stuffing him and he obliged her, gobbling happily and polishing the plate with his tongue, when she presented it for him to lick. On a full stomach the nature of his plight did not seem so dire. He would merely wait until they had all gone to sleep and call the golden-eyes mare to help him escape. But where had she gotten to?

He passed his eyes over the scruffy steppe ponies of Zebek's herd — a scrawny, ill-fed bunch as he had ever seen — until he spied her sleek buckskin profile, and called to her softly in the old language. She merely looked at him sadly and raised her left rear hoof to show that it was chained to a heavy stake. Her golden eyes reproached him, saying, "This is all your fault." And well he knew it! How foolish to allow himself to be captured by the cross-worshippers. He had never been so careless among the Cossacks, knowing full well the fate of suspected "vampires," but he had never before encountered Christian converts among the Tartars. This could be a bad business indeed.

Still, he had his wits about him, and apparently four days until the priest was due. Perhaps he could play with their demon beliefs to his advantage.

"How do you intend to keep me here?" he inquired. "For if you sleep, I will make a spirit knife to set me free."

"Then we will post a guard," said Zebek, falling for Spareen's ruse. A single guard, hopefully.

"No, please don't do that!" wailed Spareen, "And especially don't let me be guarded by a woman, else I'll never leave this place."

"Thank you for telling me this, foolish demon," siad Zebek. "This night my wife and daughter will guard you in shifts."

Spareen moaned and groaned and tried to sound appropriately miserable, while inwardly rejoicing that Zebek was so gullible.

They built a watch fire outside the yurt, and some of Zebek's neighbors came to stare and poke at the "demon." One, an elderly, stoop-shouldered graybeard named Shambai-Noyon, stopped and peered through crusted lids at Spareen. Another avenue of hope opened in Spareen's mind.

"Truly, Father, I am not really a demon but a member of the race called Varkela — surely you have lived long enough to have heard of my people. We are healers."

"Varkela ..." muttered the elder.

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"An odd name. Where have I heard it before?"

"You have a scar on your nose," said Spareen. "Perhaps as a child, your father brought you to be protected against smallpox, by a Varkela leechman." Spareen referred to the Oriental method of vaccination in which infected material was placed in the nose.

"Yes ... there was something like that ... I don't remember well. Too many of my memories are clouded with age — like mare's milk too long fermented, the whey is bitter. Most people were lost in the 'Great Migration.' I don't like to think of those times." He was referring to the migration of Kalmucks in 1777, when a large party of them tried to return to Mongolia. Most of them died in the harsh Siberian winter.

"I am sorry, elder," said Spareen. "I did not wish to cause you pain. But if you remember the Varkela, let me try to heal your eyes to prove that I am what I say. Do not let them turn me over to the Russian priest who will cut out my heart and burn it."

"Too many memories," said the elder. "I must go and settle them with sleep." And Spareen's hope in that direction slipped away.

The first guard posted was Zebek's teenaged daughter, Neshe. She sat at the fire, at as far a distance from him as possible, and sewed with demurely lowered eyes, her fingers plucking the needle back and forth as she plunged it through the thick cloth.

"What are you making?" asked Spareen, hoping to engage her eyes.

"Trousers," she said, not looking at him. The needle flickered in the firelight.

"For whom?" he asked.

"For myself." She continued to concentrate on her sewing, her small fingers working swiftly.

"You're a very pretty girl, do you know that?"

"You're a demon. How would you know?"

"Look me in the eye, and I'll tell you how I know."

She raised her head and looked straight at him with eyes full of trusting innocence. Ah, she had never heard the rumors about the ways of Varkela with women. It was almost too easy to witch her with his dark Varkela eyes, making her desire him, luring her to come and kneel before him, awaiting his pleasure. Carefully, he hunched forward, trying to catch the handle of the little kinjal she wore at her waist in his teeth. He hoped it was a real knife with a sharpened blade, not just a womanish decoration. Patiently, she knelt there, an unmoving automaton, while he pushed at her with his head, trying to snare the small daggar's handle with lips or teeth. There! He had it!

"Neshe! Pull back!' came a cry from the door way of the yurt. Immediately the girl came to her senses and gave Spareen a good smack with her forearm that sent him sprawling.

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"You didn't really think I'd trust the sayings of a demon, did you?" said Zebek, stepping forth from the yurt, his dark, oiled features shining in the fire's glare. "You have some power over women, but I outsmarted you. Now we'll see how you manage with two strong men to guard you. Zagan! Come watch with me," he called to one of the other six dwellings, and another Kalmuck appeared carrying an old-fashioned matchlock weapon.

Spareen's spirits sank. A woman he could witch, and a single man he might possibly have mesmerized, but two of them insured that there would be no chance of escaping this night. To comfort himself he raised his mighty voice and sang a song in the Varkela tongue about the wolf-minded girls of his own people, how they could not be witched, and how much he desired to marry with one. This just made him sadder, for Varkela women were few, due to an illness that claimed many of them before puberty, and there was little chance he would ever marry. When dawn came, two more of them arrived to guard him, and he rolled over, pressing his face into the sweet grasses to block out the cruel light of day, and slept his death-sleep again.

His people, the Varkela, had originated, according to their tradition, in the Altai Mountain region north of Mongolia. Since time immemorial they had plied their healing trade among the nomads of the steppe. In A.D. 400 many of them had migrated west with the hordes of Attila the Hun, who welcomed these practitioners of leechcraft to bind up the wounds of many battles. They were an old race and were dying out, but occasionally here or there one might run across one of these strange fellows who spoke the horse's language, slept during the daylight hours, healed the sick and, as the price of healing, drew a cupful of blood through thin, hollow were-teeth. Their reputation as healers was outstanding, as it had to be — for one had to produce cures to earn payment in human blood. And so Spareen had followed his calling, gelding colts, worming sheep, pulling teeth, cooling fevers, to earn his necessary fee, as his fathers had done for centuries before him. But hard times had brought him to these more western territories where his people were a memory that had perhaps lent substance to the vampire myth.

When he next awoke, his blood-teeth ached like twin mounds in his upper jaw, and he knew he would have to feed their hunger soon, but his first concern was to gain his freedom from this capivity. The pale light of dusk greeted his eyes when he opened them and above him, Shambai-Noyon, the aged one, looked down at him, a gray pigtail swinging free over one shoulder.

"Tell me, young man, if you are not a demon, why do you cringe at the sign of the cross?" he asked Spareen.

"Because I am Varkela," said Spareen. "In my religion, the cross is not

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the symbol of your teacher, Christ, but rather a sign representing the 'hammer of the Sun.' The name 'Varkela' means 'Children of the Night,' and we worship Our Lady Moon, so the sun is the devil and we shun his sign. That is why we sometime say of the Christians, 'Their god is our devil.' "

"Well answered," said Shambai, running a hand through his sparse gray beard. "There is truth in you, in spite of your attempt to deceive Zebek and his daughter. In fact, as I recall, your kind has a nefarious reputation with regard to women — but let us put you to the test. We have decided to give you a chance. If you are truly Varkela, then, as my father taught me, you can cure any disease, and we have a patient on whom you can prove yourself."

"I can't heal all diseases," said Spareen, "but I will most certainly try."

"We have agreed that if you can heal this person, you will go free, but if not, we will save you for the priest to examine. If you are Varkela, as you say, you should have no trouble proving it."

Spareen wanted to protest that he was not some sort of wizard, but decided it would be of no use. It was ironic to be in a situation where for once the reports about his race were too glowing to live up to, rather than the usual malign rumors he'd heard out in this territory.

"I am going to untie your hands and bring you your things," said Shambai. "But I'm warning you not to try to escape. Zebek mistrusts you for trying to trick him. I have some say over him, being an elder of the council, but he says he'll put a bullet into you if you make a wrong move, and there's little I could do to stop him, but he's agreed to abide by the results of the test."

"And what will be the test?" asked Spareen uneasily. He hoped it was some curable illness, and not healing of a hopeless cripple as their teacher, Christ, was reported to have done.

"I will bring you the patient, my young grandson, Yulay."

They brought the boy, who looked fairly healthy. Spareen was glad that he was not a cripple, and that it was not a life-or-death matter, but his heart despaired when they removed the child's shirt to reveal an angry papular rash over most of his back and chest. There are millions of things that can cause such a rash, thought Spareen, and he doubted that he'd be able to find a cure in three short days, but he knew he must try. If a Christian priest took a close look inside his mouth, it would all be over.

Patiently he began to question them about the rash. When had it appeared? How long had it lasted? Was there fever?

He wasn't able to ascertain too much. The boy had had the rash chronically off and on for about four years, which ruled out contagious, short-term diseases like measles, smallpox, sheep pox, and scarlet fever. The

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child seemed to have it more in the winter than in the summer, and usually just on his upper body, but on rare occasions, on his legs and thighs also.

Spareen racked his brain trying to think of a source of the symptoms. The rash was apparently seasonal — could it be an effect of cold weather, perhaps? There were many conditions that were seasonal. He was reminded of his brother Vaylance's seasonal asthma attacks, brought on by exposure to certain flowers in the springtime. He had an idea!

"Bring me all the boy's clothes and let me cut a small patch from each garment." Spareen set out to test his theory, praising Mircafta, the lady in the moon, for giving him this burst of insight. It was only one chance out of hundreds that he'd be right, but it was the only thing he'd thought of that had a cure close to hand.

"Keep the child inside near the fire, and do not let him wear anything on the upper part of his body."

Two days later all the people of the settlement came to see the results of Spareen's test.

"You see," said Spareen, "There is no rash around the patch of flax or the one of linen that represents his summer clothes." He pointed to the patches of cloth that he had fixed to the boy's thigh with drops of warm tallow. "And you can see that his rash has cleared up after two days without a shirt. This patch of rabbit fur also shows no rash, but look at this one...." He pointed to the patch of wool. Around it the skin had reddened and it must have itched for the child kept trying to scratch.

"You see, his skin is sensitive to wool which he wears in winter, or on cold days. In the summer he wears flax, linen, or no shirt at all, and he doesn't suffer. But in the winter, the wool itches and he scratched the irritation, making it worse, until a rash forms. Fortunately, a small change in behavior will solve the problem. Make him a winter shirt of rabbit pelts, and he should have no more cause to scratch."

"He's proved himself Varkela," said Shambai-Noyon. "As my father said, they can cure all diseases."

"Not all diseases," said Spareen. "But I believe I have an ointment in my pouch that will do for those crusty eyelids of yours."

"And now about the matter of payment," said the aged Kalmuck.

"My freedom is payment enough," said Spareen, not wishing to arouse any more superstitious thoughts among them by revealing his need for blood.

"No, you deserve other payment," Shambai insisted. "My little grandson suffered four years until you came along." Then he said, lowering his voice that only Spareen might hear, "Let me have the honor of paying the blood-price for my clan. I am a gray-haired elder of the council, and you must respect my wishes."

"Well, since you put it that way,

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how can I refuse," said Spareen. "But let us go into your yurt, away from prying eyes that might misunderstand."

In the darkness of Shambai-Noyon's dwelling, after applying a leather thong as a tourniquet, Spareen slipped one needle-thin tooth into the proper vein of the old man's proffered forearm, and drank a scant cupful of the red juice of life into his blood-starved vessels, enough to keep his hunger quiet for a time.

And before Spareen could take his leave, the old Tartar pressed a gift into his hand, which Spareen tried half-heartedly to refuse, but at last gave in without too much persuading.

"It wasn't much of cure," he told the golden-eyes mare while saddling her, "But at least I earned my freedom." He pulled tight the cinch and climbed aboard.

"And now I suppose you'll swill all your wine to celebrate, if I know you," said the mare.

"No wine tonight, I've changed my ways," said Spareen. "I've decided to take your advise and make a small change in my behavior."

The ears of the golden-eyes mare stood straight up like musket bayonets. She swung her head around and stared at him, saying:

"I've been hoping to hear you say that for a long time."

Spareen grinned down at her, a bottle of Muscovite vodka, the old Kalmuck's gift, clenched in his ham-sized fist.

"I might have known!" shrilled the mare. She set out for the wagon road at a bone-shaking trot. "I suppose you think that's doing better," she neighed angrily, kicking up small rocks in her path.

Above them gray clouds scudded across the moon, threatening rain again, but in spite of that, Spareen felt it would be a beautiful night for singing. As they made their way along the wagon track between windswept oceans of waving feather grass, a plover broke cover, keening as it mounted, flapping into the wind.

"Some people don't know an improvement when they see one," sighed Spareen, slipping the vodka flask back into his pocket.

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This story, which deals in a not entirely serious manner with the deadly power of banality, is from a 31-year-old New Yorker whose work has appeared in Sport Magazine, The New York Times, The North American Review *and others. Mr. Queenan says that he recently completed a novel "about cheapness after death."*

The Power of the Spoken Word

BY
JOSEPH QUEENAN

The greengrocer was the first to get it. There we were, chewing the fat, having a nice little chitchat about how much Mister Farmer needed the rain when all of a sudden, without a word of warning, Mr. Kim got that funny look in his eyes, that intimations-of-immortality, last-roundup-time expression. The next thing I knew, he'd keeled over and cashed in his chips. I gave his body the once-over: dead as a doornail. I was profoundly affected, deeply moved, greatly shocked. For once in my life, I was a survivor.

He wasn't.

The bus driver was the next to check out. Harking back to our conversation, I seem to recall having said, "Funny weather we've been having lately," "Must be all that nuclear testing," and "Weatherman says it should be nice for the weekend, though." The last syllable was just barely out of my mouth when he too went the way of all flesh, the bus careening off in the general direction of a telephone pole, though Heavens be praised, one of my co-passengers did have the presence of mind to take the wheel and steer us out of harm's way, averting a major disaster. Thanking my lucky stars to have escaped with my hide, I discussed the driver's untimely death with my fellow travelers, muttering a few choice words about "knowing not the day nor the hour," about how he looked — and I quote — "so young," and about the truth of the old adage that "when you gotta go, you gotta go." My companions must have taken my words to heart, because they had to go, and they went.

An even dozen, stone-dead.

In the next three hours, I would engage in the following conversations:

Person whose ear I bent: The cop

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on the beat. My comments: "You guys don't get enough credit." "The Supreme Court's got your hands tied." "Turn-'em-loose judges will be the death of this country." Results: Death.

Person whose ear I bent: That old reliable paperboy. My comments: "Got the time?" "How's the family?" "Chin up." Result: Death.

Person whose ear I bent: The cute-as-a-button waitress down at the greasy-spoon café. My comments: "Hold the mayo." "Easy on the hot peppers." "I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse." Result: Death.

Nine others had bitten the dust by the end of the day, making it virtually impossible for me to deny my involvement in their deaths, patently absurd though it might seem. Reconstructing each of the tragedies, I was ultimately forced to come to grips with the fact that each and every one of these friends and other strangers had gone down for the count scant seconds after I'd finished mouthing a series of banal remarks, clichés, and/or platitudes. And though it would take me all of another forty-eight hours to get a fix on the full extent of my awesome, albeit bizarre powers, I would eventually reach the inescapable conclusion that I, and I alone, was as it were, capable of laying low an otherwise normal, healthy human being simply by spitting out three shopworn expressions in a row, four if the person happened to be hard of hearing.

For the love of Mike.

Fearing for the well-being of my family, my friends, my society, I lit out for France the very next day, though not before stuffing my trap with socks lest I butcher any stewardesses on the flight. Because I'd flunked high school French, I was reasonably confident that I would be unable to express myself in that language, and that it would take years and years of intensive training before I would have mastered the minimal language skills needed to take life in another tongue. I couldn't have been more wrong: after just six weeks on the job posing as a deaf-mute dishwasher, I was sufficiently conversant in the idiom to put the hurt, the ultimate hurt, on the entire staff one muggy evening when I cut loose with a barrage of "*Ca vas*?", "*Plus ca change, plus c'est la même choses*," and "*Oh, ca alorss*" in the back room of a seedy Parisian restaurant. It was more of the same in Germany, Spain, Morocco, Mali. Realistically, Hungary or Lapland probably would have been just the ticket, but as it was, and is, easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than for a bogus deaf-mute American dishwasher to land a job in Budapest or up the Kola Peninsula, that was no-go, either. Besides, even behind the Iron Curtain or up near the Arctic Circle, you still ran the risk of bumping into some Limey bastard, not to mention American tourists. So what was a poor boy to do, with no place to run, no

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place to hide?

I tried Nepal.

At first, Nepal seemed to be right up my alley. Stuffed away up there in a split-level grotto I managed to sublet for peanuts from a bunch of upwardly mobile Buddhist monks who'd moved into a duplex further up the face of the mountain, I spent three years guzzling yak milk and minding my own goddamn business. Total isolation was no picnic, to be sure, but at least I was at peace with myself, not actively involved in any manslaughters for thirty-seven months. Yes sirree, Bob, it would have suited me just fine to drag out my remaining days in utter obscurity high in the Himalayas, secure in the knowledge that I was helping my fellow man in the only way I knew how, by keeping the hell away from him. But then, like a shot out of the blue, tragedy struck. On a day so clear you could see forever, I rose, shaved, brushed my teeth, flossed, and climbed out onto my favorite precipice, from which I hesitatingly embraced the universe.

"OH, WHAT A BEAUTIFUL MORNING," I shouted at the top of my voice.

"IT'S A GREAT DAY TO BE ALIVE," I added.

"ONLY GOD CAN MAKE A TREE," I tossed in for good measure.

The echo carried for miles and miles and miles. It also carried for feet and feet and feet, right down to the gaping chasm directly below, where three hundred British archaeologists had pitched camp in the dead of night, hell-bent on getting a good night's sleep so they'd wake up bright-eyed and abushy-tailed in the morning, and get cracking in their search for the lost temple of Sikma, the Hindu god of Feistiness. Not a one survived.

This just had to stop.

I was back Stateside before the week had run its course, a hefty wad of adhesive tape stretched across my blabberpuss. My course was now obvious: I would have to have my voice box removed, or at the very least, cauterized. It was the only way, and yes, honest Injun, I *was* prepared to take this dramatic step as a service to humanity, I bumped into Susie Q. Susie was the salt of the earth, the milk of human kindness, the apple of my eye, the real McCoy. She was also deaf as a doorknob. She was beyond my power to do her harm, provided I kept my lips sealed with friction tape lest she read — and fall prey to — the platitudes spilling in cataracts of banality from my throat. My strange, unconventional behavior she found most disconcerting: she told me that falling in love with a person as furtive and downright bizarre as me was a tall order to fill. We did fall in love, however, though not before I'd spilled the beans about my unusual background. It didn't seem to knock her for a loop

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or anything when I told her the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. She said that the universe was completely off the wall, and that it was getting more completely off the wall all the time. She said there wasn't much in the way of sensible explanations for various weird phenomena, such as gout or ESP or Utah. She told me not to get all het up about it.

Eventually, we banged out a system which would enable me to gradually reinsinuate myself into society and get back into the old nine-to-five ball park. (It was a bitch going to job interviews with a half-pound of cotton stuck inside my mouth.) The basic game plan ran something like this: I would have to make a concerted effort to improve the quality of my conversation, to purge my everyday vocabulary of clichés, banalities, old saws, adages, catch-phrases, conventional wisdom, flapdoodle, and so on. The crux of it all was: I was just going to have to knuckle down and start waxing more philosophical. There were no two ways about it. Susie drew up a long list of topics I was never to discuss in public, topics which readily lent themselves to the use of hackneyed expressions, thus opening the deadly floodgates of piffle and twaddle, which were my stock-in-trade. The list included baseball, art, religion, weather, politics, movies, department stores, restaurants, literature, nice beaches, ethics, pornography, politics, ethnic humor, sociology, rape, television, and furnishing one's den. That left only geology and chess. We played a lot of chess that winter, and looked at our fair share of interesting rock formations. Nor was there any shortage of chats about the Earth's crust, silt, and the Fool's Opening. We didn't have many friends, and the ones we did have didn't like us that much. We were married one fine day in June. We drank champagne. We drank too much champagne. That night, as we were guzzling too much champagne, I sprang my surprise on Susie: I'd mastered sign language. Well, let's just say I'd picked up enough to say, "Your lips are like cherries," "Your skin's as soft as a baby's bottom," and "My, you have a nice complexion."

Timber.

I was a cruel and vindictive man after Susie's death. I blamed society — the most obvious target — for everything that had gone down. I made a regular habit of nonchalantly strolling into crowded movie theaters and shrieking: "In the film, Brando give the sort of viscerally riveting performance such as we have not seen since *On The Waterfront*. That brooding quality, so much in evidence in the early roles, which later degenerated into a cheap form of self-parody ... is here resurrected in a performance which is both wise and gripping. Surely he is a national treasure...." and sit there chuckling as three hundred paying customers went to meet their Maker. Bus stops

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were handy, too. But eventually I grew tired of pointless violence and decided to go for all the gusto. I'm talking about the big money. If it was my cruel destiny to be a stark force of naked evil, the least I could do was make a few bucks off it. Thus began my plummet into the dark abyss of the human soul. While I was plummeting, I committed the following unspeakable crimes:

1.) I'd hang around night spots and diners eyeballing couple who looked like they were all set to have a tiff. As soon as I'd singled out a henpecked husband or a long-suffering wife, I'd buttonhole him or her on the way to the rest room and offer to clear up that messy spouse problem for a thousand big ones. Should the party come across with the dough, I'd sidle up to the victim the next day in the elevator or at the check-out counter somewhere and whisper, "It takes one to know one," "Don't knock it if you haven't tried it," and "Who am I to judge?" *Ciao.*

2.) For ten thousand bucks, all unmarked ones, forked over by a secret society of irate sports fans, I cornered their nemisis, one of the nation's most abrasive announcers, and said: "He's had so much time to throw, he could have written a letter to his sister," "The game's never over till the final out," and "Nice guys finish last." Game, set and match for that poor S.O.B.

3.) For fifty thousand hot smackers, I put the hit on an outspoken political figure with dynamite trio of, "There's is nothing to fear but fear itself," "We have only begun to fight," and "We shall always honor our treaty commitments with those nations with whom we share common traditions." Crunch.

Shortly after I double-whammied a convention of leftist nuns at a Chicago hotel, three IRS agents burst into my room, demanding to know where my last sixteen tax returns were, and how I was managing to pull down enough cash to run three Porches and six yachts without a steady job. I thought I was pretty fast on my feet there. letting 'em have it with a barrage of the old standbys ("Ain't that a kick in the pants?" "Will you get a load of that?" and "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle"), but only two of my three unwanted guests succombed to my verbal stingray. The third only smiled, stuffing his snub-nose into my ribs.

"Got my hearing aid turned down, chump; can't read lips, either. Looks like your goose is cooked."

Then he took me downtown, ostensibly to throw the book at me.

Jamming an apple into my mouth, stuffed-pig style, Agent Orange forced me to spill out the truth longhand. It wasn't pretty. I did try to slip in a few written clichés on him, but a sound pistol-whipping to the head convinced me that I was wasting my time. Besides, my powers didn't really extend to the printed or typed word.

"We've had you pegged for these mur-

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ders since the year One, you little clown," he spat out, handing me my rap sheet. "The nuns, that politician, that disc jockey you torpedoed in L.A. — yeah, we've been drawing a bead on you since way back when."

"You got nothin' on me," I penciled onto the page. "You'll never make these charges stick."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," he chuckled. "Tell you one thing, though: my retirement comes up Monday a week; I've done well by the company — salted away a few clams — and what the hell, with the wife gone and no kids to worry about, I've got no obligations, if you know what I mean. The way I see it, I'm on Easy Street for the duration, or at the very least till the cows come home. I got nothing better to do with my time than make sure *you* stay under wraps for good."

I had to give him credit; he came clean. Even though he agreed that pinning the murder rap on me might be tough sledding, Orange was ready to bet his life that he could put me in the deep freeze till Kingdom Come by bringing me up on a morals charge ... unless I played ball. Playing ball meant taking a powder: that is, retiring to a Trappist monastery for the rest of my days. Putting a lid on it forever. Or else.

"Otherwise, I'll plug you, and take it on the lam. You game, or you wanna play chicken?"

"That'll be murder most foul," I protested. "But what the hell, I got no beefs."

No sirree, Bob. After all, who was I to be bellyaching, unregenerate scum that I was. Merciful Heavens, I asked myself, how had I sunk this low? How had I sunk this far? What was a nice kid like me doing in a vicious circle like this? I broke down, sobbing like a motherless child, an uncleless adolescent. Later, when I'd pulled myself together, I apologized to the pride of the IRS for all of my unspeakable crimes against mankind. I said that it wouldn't happen again.

That night, I hit the road for Tennessee.

I spent seven happy years in the monastery, seven years of tight-lippedness, maintaining a low profile, and keeping a lid on it. I didn't kill off a single human being in all that time, though a couple of vintage hisses and "meows" did clear up a rat problem down in the basement pretty damn quick. Without a word of a lie, I was ready, willing, and able to play out the string in total isolation, quietly atoning for my crimes. But it was not to be. One night, I heard a tapping on my cell door. Yanking it open, I was rocked back on my heels to see Bill Orange framed in the doorway.

"I don't know nothing, you got the wrong guy, I ain't gonna be a stool pigeon for nobody," I yammered, reverting to old habits. As usual, he couldn't hear a damn thing.

"Settle down, bub; take it easy; don't get your bowels in an uproar," he

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said. "Got a little job I want you to do for me. Let's get moving. *Pronto.*"

Sí Señor.

Scant hours earlier, a 747 bound from Frankfort to Los Angeles had been hijacked by a German terrorist calling himself "Mr. Everything." His list of demands included: eight million dollars, a change of pants, and the immediate dismantling of the capitalist system. He certainly wasn't being very reasonable.

"He forced the plane down over South Dakota," Orange clued me in as we jetted north. "It was supposed to be some kind of poignant object lesson. Sounds like a screwball to me."

"And I guess you want me to cliché him into submission?" I scrawled onto my notepad.

"You got it, babes. But now I'm gonna throw you a curve. This clown's got the same kind of powers as you. Don't that take the goddamn cake?"

It took more than the goddamn cake. Mr. Everything, as luck would have it, actually had *more* powers than Yours Truly: not only could he kill by rattling off a string of platitudes; he could also turn the trick with a fast trio of stereotypical facial expressions, i.e., furrowing his brows, scratching his forehead, twinkling his beady little eyes. He'd already planted six of the hostages.

"Then he's got me outclassed, he's way out of my league," I inked in protest. "He'll cream my butt sooner than you can say 'Jack Robinson.' No bull."

"Tough break, sweetie, that's just a chance you'll have to take. Put on these goggles here: they're opaque, you know; he'd have to be breathing right down your neck before you could see him flaring his nostrils, raising his eyebrows knowingly, or ogling your thighs. Stuff some cotton into your ears, too; you'll pull through. Remember: you *do* have the element of surprise on your side. Besides, you owe it to society."

Something in the way he moved me out of the plane and into the cornfield suggested that if I didn't go along with his request to polish off the terrorist, I could be picking buckshot out of my craw for a long time. Whatever my craw was. And he was right about one thing: I *did* owe it to society. More than that, I owed it to myself. In other words, what the hell?

If worse had come to worst, which it already had, you would've thought that a couple of dozen SWAT people could have covered *their* eyes, stuffed *thier* ears with cotton, taken advantage of *their* element of surprise. Too risky for the hostages, they must have thought; with me carrying the ball, I might be able to catch Mr. Everything with his pants down. It was an all-or-nothing proposition, though, and I still didn't like the looks of it. Especially when they refused to dish out a .38.

"You take him with your trap or you don't take him at all," I was told in

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no uncertain terms. "We don't want you busting in there and shooting up the works, shavetail. Get the picture?"

I got the picture, loud and clear.

I entered the plane at the stroke of midnight, sweating bullets. Armstrong and the boys had Mr. Everything's undivided attention up there in first class; I came in through the cheap seats. I made it halfway up the aisle before he caught a glimpse of me out of the corner of his eye.

"Everybody stick your fingers in your ears and shut your eyes!" I screamed at the hostages. Then, just as he was drawing a bead on me with his lips, his eyeballs, and the revolver, I let the chump have it, both barrels.

"Two wrongs don't make a right," I shouted at the top of my voice. "It takes two to tango," I added, wrapping things up with, "Two's company; three's a crowd."

The legs seemed to go out from under him, but gee willikers, I must have lost that fine edge over the years because dang-blast-it, I'd only stunned him. Still, while he was rolling around on the floor writhing in what I, rightly or wrongly, construed to be agony, and jamming his pinkies into his ears, I did have enough breathing room to tell everyone to haul ass out of there. And ass was hauled. Meanwhile, I lurched forward, into the Valley of Death, booting the gun out of his reach.

"She's a grand old flag, she's a high-flying flag," I bellowed. Too late, he was flying right down the aisle, flailing me with a windmill right hand. I hit the deck, trying to shake off the cobwebs. It took a lot of the pep out of me, but I still managed to spit out: "It takes one to know one; hold on to your hats ... off."

Mr. Everything had a problem; in point of fact, he was in a bind. With no earplugs to fall back on, he didn't dare take his fingers out of his ears for more than a few seconds at a time, fearful that four — or maybe five — of my clichés would put him six feet under. But he still had the feet. And believe you me, a primed-for-the-pump, gung-ho, cutthroat German terrorist with a nakedly atavistic psyche and a primordial bloodlust is more than a match for a paunchy, washed-up, over-the-hill middle-aged windbag like me. As he demonstrated, by jumping up and down on my chest, knocking the stuffings out of me.

It was a load off my mind to see that so many of the hostages had made good their escape, but from where I stood, things couldn't have looked worse. But I wasn't going to take this lying down, eventually mustering the energy to gasp, "I have not yet begun to fight," and "There's plenty more where that came from." My remarks received short shrift, my tormentor now doing cartwheels on my trachea, all the while working my goggles loose. Oh no, they were off! I tried my damnedest not to look up into his crag-

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gy visage, but with him propping up my eyelids and all, that was a pretty tall order. Reluctantly, I gazed up into the eye of the storm trooper, ready to meet my Maker, as he prepared to deliver the *coup de grâce*. Holy Moses, he was pulling out all the stops now. That is,

1.) His eyebrows arched with infinite cuteness, *á la* secretaries weaned on TV sitcoms. Boy, did that hurt.

2.) His right eye began to wrinkle merrily. I felt life ebbing out of me.

3.) He got all set to glare at me with righteous indignation, but before he could deliver the merchandise I kicked him in the back of the head, NFL-style. That certainly interrupted his train of thought.

Unfortunately, it was only a glancing blow, and in two shakes of a lamb's tail he was right back with an impish grin. That was hitting below the belt. He then shifted gears with a withering stare and a sassy glint of gay insouciance. I started saying my prayers. But at that very moment, as my left hand was swinging back onto the carpet, I felt something. A plastic wrapper ... a package ... oh, if I could just get a grip on it ... inches ... inches ... please, Lord, I'll never ... quick ... just inches....

"ACHOO!!!" he exploded as the contents of the package made contact with his nose. "ACHOO!!!" he screeched. It as now or never; I knew a last chance when I saw one, so, heaving forward, I roared back and fired.

"Nobody knows you when you're down and out...."

I heard him moan.

"You gotta take the good with the bad...."

A gasp.

"You're only as old as you feel...."

Gagging sounds.

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks...."

"Have mercy," he implored, but I was fresh out of the milk of human kindness.

"Have a nice day."

There was a crunching sound; I think it was his aorta springing a leak. Just like that greengrocer so many years before, Mr. Everything got that funny look in his eyes, and with one farewell death rattle, pitched forward into the darkness.

I felt like I'd really put in a full day's work.

That was seven months ago. Since then there have been the overtures from the publishing companies, the TV network proposals for docu-dramas, calls from the Pentagon. My response to all this? Forget it, just forget it. I no longer have any illusions about the hideousness of my powers, and though I'm eternally grateful to whoever it is who runs this universe for giving me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make up for my earlier offenses, I can see now that there's no future for me. Not like this. As long as I continue to pos-

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sess this awful power to kill with my vocal chords, I'll never cease to be a threat to humanity. It has to end somewhere: the buck stops here. Tomorrow, I check into the hospital for that much-needed operation. The tongue's coming out; so is the voice box. The lungs I think I'll wait-see, but the rest of it's getting the old heave-ho. Case closed. I've seen it all, been through the wars. As of tomorrow, I'm packing it in for good. I'm hanging up banality.

I'm hanging up the lips.

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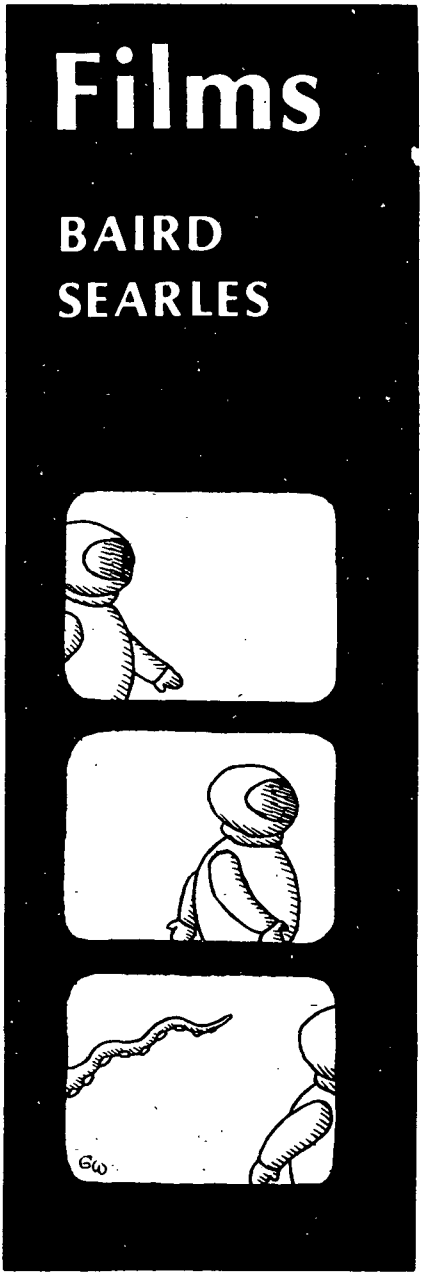
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

DRAGOONED DRAGON

I have not, nor will I soon, forgive Rankin/Bass for the havoc they wrought on the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. On the other hand, I find it hard to be hard on something as harmlessly ingratiating as their *The Flight of Dragons* which will have appeared on your tube by the time this sees print.

For one thing, this movie did not dismember any particular work — or more correctly, did so at such a peculiar remove that there was no harm done. The complex writing credits say that the movie is "Based on the original book *The Flight of Dragons* by Peter Dickinson ... Additional story material from *The Dragon & The George* by Gordon R. Dickson." (How did they resist throwing in something by Philip K. Dick?) I am not privy to how all this was put together, but the movie doesn't really have much relationship to either book. Peter Dickinson is a very interesting British writer of fantasy who is not well enough known this side of the water; his *The Flight of Dragons* is, I have on good authority, a book *about* dragons rather than a story *per se*. And while the film borrows heavily from Dickson's novel in the way of characters and incident, they are put together in a way that makes it an entirely different narrative.

The end result of this mixmaster approach to scriptwriting is a rather lumpy plot of a lot of bits and pieces,

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at least some of which display a spark of originality, particularly for the screen. A conglomerate of brother wizards at some point in the legendary past decide that logic and science are going to take over mankind, and that the best thing to do is to create a magical realm where the illogical and unscientific can take refuge. However, Ommadon, the naughty red wizard, decides to fight instead, and must be stopped.

This means a quest for his powerful red crown; to lead this quest, Carolinus, the chief *good* wizard, dragoons from our time a young writer named Peter Dickinson (!) who is bananas for dragons and fantasy gaming.

Almost the minute he arrives back then, he is kidnapped by Ommadon's equally naughty dragon, Bryagh, and in the process of being saved by Carolinus, is popped into the body of the young dragon, Gorbash, who is one of the good guys. Peter is brave about all this — after all, if you're nuts for dragons, what's better than being one? — but it does somewhat impede the progress of his relationship with the lovely Melisande, the ward of Carolinus.

So Peter/Gorbash leads the quest, which comes with the usual companions (an archer lady, a wolf, a middle-aged knight, a wood elf) and usual adventures (ogres, giant worms, etc.). The Sandmirks, whose chattering drives men mad, were a not-so-usual menace that didn't quite come off. The final confrontation becomes a contest between magic and science, which the latter wins as it will win the world of the future.

Philosophically, you should pardon the expression, there seems something perverse in this fantasy coming out squarely on the side of science — presumably those that watch it are fantasy lovers and yet are supposed to be rooting for the anti-magic forces. Well, that's perhaps loading too much of a burden on what is essentially the lightest of juvenalia.

Some well known actors lend their voices to the various characters. James Earl Jones as Ommadon certainly comes across better than he did in *Conan*, but I must confess that I found it unnerving to hear the totally familiar voice of Col. Potter of M*A*S*H intoning platitudes and magic spells as Carolinus. Visually it is pretty undistinguished, with flat two-dimensional backgrounds and characters of not much character — Melisande, in fact, is the ugliest beautiful princess I ever did see. And at this point, I'm already sick of fantasy gaming tie-ins obviously meant to provide empathy for the country's youth. (And, come to think of it, what do I mean "already" — D&D references seem as dated as checkers. That's one thing I'll say for *Tron;* it was up to date in concentrating on computer games, if we *must* cater to today's sporting adolescents.)

Those negative factors, though, don't totally undermine the fact that *The Flight of Dragons* does attempt

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some originality, particularly in its rational view of the natural history of dragons, drawn from the Dickinson book. It's, shall we say, a step up from what we've been subjected to in the past in the way of animated fantasies on the tube.

Videowares dept... Of interest on video tape is *Heartbeeps*, a film I neglected last year when it was released theatrically. *Heartbeeps* is one of those films so off the wall that one wonders how it ever came to be made; yet, as is so often the case with this sort of maverick, no matter how unsuccessful it may be overall, its very offbeatness makes it more interesting than the usual product. This one makes almost no sense whatsoever, as science fiction or as film, and yet it has an engaging silliness that carries it.

It's the picaresque saga of Val and Aqua, two top-of-the-line robots who wander away from their factory accompanied by a less classy model, a robot comic named Catskill who tells abominable jokes. Why or where they're going is never really clear; they have various encounters and adventures, and are persistently pursued by a mobile monster, the Crime Buster model who is out to get them.

The robots are almost totally unanthropomorphized, and Bernadette Peters in particular brings a wonderfully unhuman quality in movement and speech to Aqua. And though I know it's heresy, I found Phil, the small parts carrier fashioned by Val and Aqua between them ("He has your wiring." "Ah, but he has your circuits.") infinitely more appealing than E.T.; his glee at Catskill's awful jokes made them almost bearable.

Coming soon

Next month: "Brothers" by **Richard Cowper,** "The Tearing of Gallow House" by **Michael Reaves** and a remarkable and unusual story by **Kim Stanley Robinson** titled "Black Air."

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"We are terribly jaded on Io, but what alternative do we kinglies have...?"

What We Do On Io

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG

So I hobble discouragedly to the agency and ask that the mode be removed. "Invisibility is not what I thought it would be," I say. "In fact it is a terrible disappointment. I was misled." This is, not strictly speaking, true, but characteristically we kinglies affix blame outside; this is one of the necessary effects of office. "Skulking, voyeurism, immoderate observation but no participation: this is not for me. I am a social person, an administrator; the limits of invisibility offend. Something else. I want something else!"

They sigh and shake their heads. Confer. I have not made it easy for them at the agency, none of us do; but considering the exorbitant fees we pay, there is no reason we should. "Teleportation, telekinesis, telepathy," they say, "what do you want?"

"Pyrokinesis?"

"That is a bad idea," they point out and remind me of the uncontrollable flames on Callisto not three cycles ago; an entire Jovian detachment was called in to quell, and the kingly himself died. "Pyrokinesis is temporarily withdrawn," they say. "We are working on some kind of automatic limitation. You people do tend to become overexcited."

I shrug and nod; they are right, we kinglies do. It is our megalomania, of course. Only kinglies can afford the agency services, and we can lose control: inordinate wealth, boredom and resentment at the isolation imposed by these can make one extremely restless. "I will try teleportation again," I say. "It didn't work out too well before, but several cycles have passed; perhaps there are satisfactions I was too immature to recognize the first time. I am always willing to replicate. What alternative do we kinglies have?"

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"Indeed," they say, "indeed," and pass through my folder, discreetly prepare a voucher which I sign. In the treatment center, the invisibility modes are deftly removed under local anesthetic, the teleportative modes implanted. "Give it a little time," the technicians warn, "do not try too much at once." Standard agency talk. At every level they are self-protective, as would stand to reason; they are on the bare margins of legality. But one of the prerogatives of the kinglies is to transcend caution. The worst that can happen, after all, is permanent, irreversible brain damage. That would give me a new kind of pain. I am terribly jaded, as you have already observed.

The instant I leave the center, accordingly, I inhale deeply, transport myself to Titan. Titan is dull, the same old place; parties and corruption have not changed since I was last there. Anomie and perversity are rife. The sea beasts continue to die under the terraforming; they are washed up on all the shores of Titan, decomposing. Enough of this. On Ganymede there are hints of joviality under the cruel administration of the robot kinglies, but decadence and destruction are still the mode; I essay an affair but we come to nothing under the giant dome. Nada, nada, there is no control. Jupiter roams hugely above us as once more I confess my inner freezing, my emotional death. *Pardonne*? she says. I laugh.

Venus is somewhat livelier for just a while, and under the heavy influence of *spican* I think that I have perceived some manner by which I can control my uncontrollable life, but this passes through the blood almost as rapidly as the terrible drug itself, and I am on to further incitements. New York and Salama City are inert, as usual, and the castles of my parents are filled with their friends who, quite unlike me, have already given up. Accordingly, I return to the agency. "Telekinesis," I say loudly, pounding on the glistening surfaces of a desk to accentuate the point, "I want telekinesis at once!"

They shrug, mumble, lead me self-indulgently to chambers, perform the usual ablutions and enchantments, send me to an anteroom where I practice with pots and knives, circle them for their observation. Released to try more complex game, I whimsically bring the mad King of Io to my chambers.

The mad King, dressed only in his ceremonials, shakes and murmurs imprecations, terrible threats of Ionian vengence until I hurl him at a wall, then dispatch him stunned to the palace. I hate the mad King. Doesn't everyone? He is so terribly jaded; he obtains pleasure from nothing but aspects of self-hatred. When I come to the agency to report proudly on what I have done, they look at me with horror. "You cannot do this," they say, "there are limitations imposed; now consider what can happen. We'll hear from Io on this."

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I point out that Io is a minor colony filled with lunatics. The agency and its clientele can do anything they wish, but they do not, somehow, accept my argument; instead they hustle me into chambers to remove the telekinetic power, and even though I bring dangerous, gleaming weapons from Phobos to fight them off, they overcome me, stun me with *spican* and remove the mode. When I awaken it is in a somewhat chastened state.

"All right," I say then in a humbler fashion, "telepathy, that's something you can control, right? Give me that; I'm bored with stones and travel, anyhow."

"Travel it will be," they say but cautiously keep me under restraints while the new mode is implanted: when I emerge from the wraps, their thoughts, of course, are as open to me as wounds, and I know their fear and contempt. They perceive me as uncontrollable: some monstrously indulgent force, when the fact is — how can I make them see this? — that I am undone by aspects of omnipotence and look only for a means to assess my humanity. With fear and contempt they release me and I mingle with the crowds and purpose of Philadelphia. In the Philadelphia streets the stupor and resentment appalls: waves of impotence and clangorous hatred overcome; inside the palaces I find them somewhat calmer but no less pained.

Understanding he no understanding the woman with whom I lie thinks, *he no understanding these kinglies no no* as I take her; in the small abyss of our coupling the certainty of her little thoughts push open no mystery, and I feel the despair of the telepath: all that is given back to us are large or smaller versions of ourselves. I *could* be mad King of Io. Are we any different?

The mad King of Io would, like me, use telepathy and *spican* to dream away the time. I return, preoccupied, to the agency. They seem bewildered. "Again?" they say. *Again,* they think.

"Again," I say, "I want something entirely different."

"Pyrokinesis is unavailable. We have explained that."

"Something different," I say, "not any of your feeble enchantments." *He is crazy, all those kinglies are,* they think. I claw at the nodes. "Get these out," I say. "I can't take it any more."

"What can't you take?" they say, *he's crazy,* they think as they lead me to chambers and remove the modes. "We will give you something special," they finally say, "something unlike anything you have had before."

"Please," I say, "do that, nothing works for me: teleportation, telepathy, telekinesis, it's all the same."

"This is different," they assure, "all different," and overload me with *spican,* and when I awaken I am in a truly glacial place, the plume of my breath surrounding and unable to move, although I struggle. Oh my, I struggle! The autonomic nervous system has, however, broken; it must be

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the drug ... and then the mad King of Io himself seems to be standing over me. "*You* again," he says, "come here," and reaches towards me.

Of what happens then I have little recollection, but one thing is sure: when I emerge from that expected collision, I am convinced that I will find invisibility just fine. "Make me invisible," I say to the technicians, "make them unable to see me!" I scream, and they hasten to comply. Oh, invisibility for we kinglies (here is the moral, and not a moment too soon) is what we must have to remain alive in this world that gives us everything, allows us nothing, nothing, nothing, and forces that mad King of self to such awful and necessitous contest.

"It's derivative? Derivative of what?"

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Avram Davidson's last F&SF story was "Dr. Bhumbo Singh," (October 1982). His latest concerns a painter who falls ill and comes to London to recover, only to fall under the influence of...

Buchanan's Head

BY

AVRAM DAVIDSON

Grant lived in sin with a buxom shrew; Tumbleton was in effect director of a privately endowed museum. After Eustace Williams had somewhat slightly recovered from his second nervous attack, Doctor Douglas McFall told him straightforwardly that he must give up the cottage-studio. He told him this in the presence of Williams's friend Tumbleton and Grant, who had come down with McFall from town on the 9:15; and of his friend Harrison, who had already been staying with Williams in the country since having learned of the attack. The sick man's condition was of such a nature that he required and would (for a while, as yet to be determined) require constant medical attention; and McFall, regardless of the fees, could not constantly be coming down to attend him; other medical men in the neighborhood of Troy Barns there was none. The cottage-studio stood nearer to two miles from the station than not. Sometimes there was a dogcart waiting, or a trap; more often there was not. The weather was unpredictable: McFall could neither be expected to burden himself with mackintosh or oilskins nor risk exposure to pneumonia as an alternative. Troy Barns was an out-of-the-way and brutish place, no neighbors for a full mile in any direction, and the sullen groom who acted as manservant could not be expected to prepare decent food if such were always available, which was not the case; upon neither the butcher's cart nor the baker's could one rely. McFall wound up this speech from, as it were, the throne, by saying he wondered Williams had not died of scurvy by now.

"Which he damned well would have," said Grant, in his usual growl,

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"if Harrison had not come down ahead of us."

Harrison said nothing, but touched his light gold beard, a gesture which often did him in place of speech. Williams gave evidence of desiring to say something, but he was still too feeble, and McFall racked on. "No chemist in case you run out of medicine, which you might, or you or that oaf Crutchett spill it, same thing it would come to: no. I want you where I can look at you and look you over as often as I think proper. You can't go on living on bacon and bad potatoes and stale bread and stewed tea, you'll be able to have fresh meat — chops, a joint, a nice fowl — and sprouts and greens, some decent wine, whatever I think best for your diet as we go along. If you have another of these moods in which you feel you cannot stay in the house, why, step to the curb and call a hansom or a four-wheeler — instead of rushing out into this barbarous wilderness and risk falling into an old quarry."

Williams moved forward in his chair, his lips began to move, he licked them, moved his right hand. But McFall gave him no chance. McFall said he didn't care how "romantic" the cottage-studio was for a painter or poet, he wanted Williams within short distance of a hospital, *if need be* (he emphasized those words), and in particular St. Olave's, where McFall stood high, though he did not say so; what he said was that Professor Schneiderhaus of Lepizig, a man knowing more about nervous diseases than any other man in Europe, including Charcot, was spending a year at St. Olave's. Even McFall had to pause for breath, at which Williams said something at last, but so weakly that he could scarcely be heard to speak at all.

Tumbleton it was who spoke and was heard, preening his left side-whisker, then his right: "After all, Williams," he said, "you can paint and write in London as well as anywhere. Lots of chaps do."

No: McFall, ignoring Tumbleton, pointed a thick finger at the sick man and said, in rolling tones, "I absolutely forbid you to touch brush to paint or pen to paper for at least six months. You are to undergo no exertion at all. For at least six months. For at least six months you are to do nothing requiring the expenditure of nervous energy more than to dress, climb into a smoking jacket, put your feet on the fender of the fireplace, and pick up a newspaper or a magazine. You are to take naps in the afternoon. One evening a week, if one of your friends — and you may thank your good stars that you have such good friends — if one or two or all three of these gentlemen here for that matter, wish to take you out for dinner at a quiet place, or to a music hall or a concert, why, very well, I allow that. But mind you: *no drama.*"

He stopped, indicated by a rise of his tufty brows that Williams would at last be allowed to speak. After a moment, Williams did so.

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"What is the alternative?" he whispered.

"Death or the straight-waistcoat," said McFall, with quite terrible promptness.

Williams collapsed back into his chair.

"Well, there's no more to be said," said Grant. "We'll pack you *up*" — he thrust the poker into the smoky fire as though it had been a mortal enemy; but still it smoked — "and take you back to *town*. You'll live a quiet life, we'll all see to that, we'll all look after you, and I understand from Dr. McFall as we were coming down, that at the end of six months, when you will be much better, that there would be no objection raised if you'd wish to try the sea air; damn these coals, they aren't proper coals at all, they're half slate; in London you'll have decent coals, you'll be *warm!*"

"*Warmth,*" said McFall, "is of the utmost importance in illness of your sort. You *must* have a good fire." The lamp smoked, too, in its sooty globe, but Grant, having failed to do anything with it a moment earlier, did not try now. The wavering small light of the lamp, the dim sun through the grimy windows and dusty skylight, did little to show what might be on the unfinished canvas in the corner where an armor breastplate hung askew on a tailor's dummy and a mass of cobweb had settled on a plumed hat; or what might be written on any of the dusty sheets of paper on the desk in another corner, loosely confined by what looked like a dictionary — something clattered in the kitchen, something smashed, somebody swore. Briefly.

"There is a problem," Harrison said. His voice was rather high, but it was not effeminate. "I live with my father and my brother, my brother is somewhat simpleminded, a gentle soul and no trouble to *us*, we know his ways, but he is not a fit companion for an invalid. Tumbleton is a married man with a small child, and, I understand, another soon to be expected." Tumbleton did not precisely preen, but he did straighten himself a bit. And nod. "Eustace could hardly stay *there.*" Tumbleton suddenly looked grave and slightly shook his head. "Grant has his own arrangements." Grant lived in sin with a buxom shrew whom only Grant could manage, and then only within certain limits, and within those limits there could be no place for Williams. Grant said nothing; his face, smooth-shaven save for a moustache, did not move. Grant exported cheap bottled spirits to the Colonies under a variety of bright labels, all of which he himself had designed; now and then when the sale of one label flagged, Grant designed another: this had become the extent of Grant's work as an active artist.

The wind wuthered down the chimney, driving more smoke into the room; Dr. McFall reproved it by coughing and waving his hands. "Very well, very well; what is the problem? Shall I tell you what is the problem?

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The problem is that your friend Williams is a very ill man. I have done my best for him before. Has it helped, no it has not helped. This is his second breakdown. The tonic which I prescribed after the first, I see it untouched. The elixir, on the contrary, is all over the floor, and the bottle is still where it fell. The diet pudding? In the larder, untouched, save for what the rats have mucked about. The claret, on the other hand, which should have lasted another month, is gone, it is clean gone, there are not even any empty bottles, but there is a barrel of beer which I did not order, and a case of gin, which I absolutely forbade; *that* is the problem, *that*, and the minor matter that your friend Williams had the good fortune to be found lying by the road, well-nigh insensible, by perhaps the only police-constable to have passed this way since the Chartists marched on London; what is the time, I must not miss my train, I have a Harley Street office with patients waiting for me, I have a practice in the Borough with a rather young partner who wants being looked in on rather often, I have wards to walk to St. Olave's — problems? problems? Do not speak to *me* of problems, Mr. Harrison."

He glanced at his watch, raised his eyebrows, began next to put things back into his black case. Harrison touched his beard, but, nonetheless, said, "There is a problem of money. And where Eustace is to live. Not here, certainly, but—"

McFall would be butted no buts; his red face grew redder. Williams had money of his own, had he not? What? It had been somehow anticipated? There was a shortage in the last quarter's income and there were no accounts, no hopes of recovering any of the shortage? (Things were suddenly very quiet in the kitchen.) Well, he, McFall, had not said that Williams must take rooms in the Albany, neither did he advise him to live in a doss house in Stepney. There were other places, quite livable, places respectable and yet inexpensive. "Mr. Grant and Mr. Tumbleton and I have already discussed this." He snapped the crocodile-bag shut.

Tumbleton blinked, taken slightly by surprise, fluffed his whiskers. "Ah, yes, Williams, Harrison, we did. We did. Old Solomon, you know old Soloman, the painter's cousin? Picturesque old fellow, 'the artists' friend,' they call him, buys and sells used canvases, picture frames, easels, and such things, buys ... rents out ... sells ... ah, theatrical costumery and painter's props and ah—"

Grant was suddenly as impatient as the physician. "Oh, damn it, man, don't give us an inventory of old Soloman's business affairs. He is in the *cheap* business, and he had a *cheap* house on lease in Upper Welchman Street and is willing to rent the first floor *cheap*, rent not on an annual but on a quarterly basis — so you needn't be hung up for a year's money when

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you'll likely not be needing the place for more than six months. Eustace Williams may store all his things in one of the rooms on the second floor, or in two of them, for that matter: so long as Solomon continues to have access to his own rubble and rubbish also stored up there on the same floor. It is just the thing for you, Williams, and there is no other thing for you, Williams, and thank God for you that you needn't depend for pennies, to say nothing of pounds, on the sale of a painting or a poem, Williams." Williams blinked very rapidly and for a very long moment after Grant said this last.

Things did not, really, go at all badly.

Crutchett vanished without trace, and with him the possibility of a detailed explanation of the perhaps not precisely alchemical mystery of how an amount of Williams's money had been transmuted into dross — or even how several dozens of claret had become, somehow, changed into at least one barrel of beer and a quantity of gin. But it was felt that this was a fair price to pay for a total absence of Crutchett. Old Solomon, it turned out, slightly to Grant's annoyed surprise, was surprised to think that the gentleman had thought the furniture of the apartments in Upper Welchman Street was not included in the rent: it was; it was old furniture, but it was good enough: so *there* was a saving, *there*. And, perhaps equally surprising, perhaps even more, only Grant could have said, and Grant did not say; Kitty — whom Grant referred to, when he referred to her at all, as "my slut" — Kitty undertook to see that the apartments were cleaned, and Kitty *did* see to it that the apartments were cleaned. It was Kitty who hired the cook-housekeeper, and Kitty who swooped down at irregular and unannounced intervals to see that the cooking was done and that the house was kept, and kept as well as anyone could expect. She came usually, and departed, usually, while Williams was being taken somewhere which made very little demand on his nervous energy; Harrison once asked, curiously, "Have you ever actually *seen* her?"

"No," said Williams, incuriously, "but I have heard her. Once." Perhaps Dr. McFall might not have approved. But no one told him. Dr. McFall, it is true, did not come to see Williams as often as Williams's friends had expected. Not quite as often. However, his directions were scrupulously carried out: Williams drank the claret, and he drank it *as prescribed*. And Williams was taken regularly to St. Olave's, where Professor Schneiderhaus asked him many questions and grunted a great deal and peered at the insides of his lower eyelids, and other things like that. Eustace had little to do, otherwise, except to thrust his feet into his slippers and place his slippered feet on the fender of the fireplace in which

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burned real coal, and to read the papers. The daily papers arrived twice a day; the reviews were lent by Tumbleton, who brought them himself, but did not pay for them himself, they being paid for by the Duke's Museum, of which Tumbleton was Vice-Director. The Hon. Director was the present Duke himself, who never set foot in the Museum except for the Annual Meeting, or when there was an exhibition of Landseer. Or Bonheur. The Duke was very fond of Bonheur. "There, Tumbleton, you *see*? A woman, a mere slip of a woman, and a *French*woman, at that: and just see what she does with horseflesh. Eh? Now, why cannot our English artists all paint that sort of thing? Eh? Tumbleton?"

The Duke, of course, never dreamed of looking at the list of periodicals to which the Museum subscribed, and, to the one single member of the Board who ever had, and who had asked why the Museum subscribed to literary publications "as well," Tumbleton solemnly replied, "Because, Sir Bascomb, it is part of the whole duty of man." Sir Bascomb never asked again. Williams, of course, never asked at all.

Though from time to time he would exclaim, almost with a note of despair in his voice, "Oh, God! Another exhibition of *that* fellow's wretched daubs!" or, "Dear Lord! *Another* edition of this man's wretched doggerel?" To which Tumbleton might reply, with a good-natured shrug, that this man or that fellow seemed to have the knack of pleasing the public taste. "The public *taste*. Oh, God. Dear Lord." Williams might actually strike his own head with his fist.

His friends were divided as to how to reply to such scenes. Harrison did once suggest that perhaps some of the reviews should be withheld, Tumbleton (unhappy) had pointed out that Williams would be sure to notice their absence, Harrison (unhappy) had perforce agreed. Tumbleton suggested that an edition of Williams's unpublished poems was just the thing to raise his wasted spirits. Harrison said that he was merely the junior partner in the firm and that his father, who was the senior, had more than once pointed out how meagerly the single publication of Williams's other poems ("...although, mind you, certainly the best...") had sold. Harrison suggested that an exhibition of Williams's paintings was what was really needed. And Tumbleton sighed, stirred, said that, even *should* the Duke agree (and one feared he wouldn't), why — the excitement! No, no. Williams must on no account be allowed to become excited. And Grant had made a very coarse suggestion as to what *he* felt that Williams needed.

"To buck him up," said Grant, growling.

"Eustace is still fearfully ill, you know."

"Eustace can *try*, can't he? What I have admired about him is that he al-

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ways did try, never mind what the critics said, damn the critics, he would *try!* Again. Reason why he went to that bloody place in the country: to try. No, I tell you that what he needs is—"

"But it *is exciting*, and the doctor—"

A shaft of light lit up Harrison's pale beard and hair, but Grant grimaced, said, "About as exciting as any other natural function, I'm sure the doctor would agree."

The doctor did not say if he would agree or not agree, when, not very long after, Grant ran him down in the private bar of a place near the Hospital. He grunted (perhaps a habit picked up from Schneiderhaus), asked, "Is he sleeping well these days?"

Grant rubbed his smooth cheeks and chin, fingered his sleek moustache, and said, No, he believed not. Fellow was complaining about that just the other day, said Grant. "Well," McFall declared, heavily, "he damned well should be sleeping well. Why hasn't he been sleeping well? Should be sleeping well. Lack of sleep must inevitably lead to death or the straight-waistcoat. Why hasn't he been taking a sleeping-draught?" Grant stared a moment. Then, with a degree of uncustomary tact, suggested that perhaps "the Professor" had neglected to prescribe him one. McFall grunted again.

"Shouldn't wonder. Foreign fellows don't know everything, look at Charcot and his hysterical cow-maids turning somersaults, *I* shall damned well prescribe him one. By Zeus and by Apollo." He called for pen and he called for ink, wrote so firmly that the nib at one point dug into the paper. Called for brandy.

"More brandy, Doctor?"

"Yes, damn it, waiter, more brandy. Do you think that I drank the ink. I shall pay for it *instantia*, too, more than I can say for some of my patients, I have a Harley Street office to pay for, and the lease on a house in the Borough to pay for where I have an incompetent partner to pay for and I have a house and a wife and two unmarried daughters in Belgrave Square and an unmarried son to pay for and carriages and horses to pay for, and if you were obliged to walk the wards with me and observe the immense amount of human misery which can never be paid for—" McFall stopped abruptly, stared at Grant. Who stared back. McFall tried to hand Grant the pen, then handed him the prescription. "The chemist will put the directions on the bottle," he said. "I used to dispense when I first began practice but I don't now. Do not even think of sending your friend to try the sea air as yet. It would be death or the straight-waistcoat. Wait-*ter*."

Williams felt much better. "Sleep, sleep, is nature's sweet restorer," he informed Harrison. "It is sleep which knits up the raveled sleeve of care."

"Eustace, you have no idea how happy I am to hear you say so."

Williams was happy to be saying

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so. "It makes all the difference. The difference between strolling in a rose garden and tossing on a bed of thorns."

"I say, you ought to write that down, you know."

"Ought I? Well, perhaps you are— No." He settled into his easy chair again, a faint smile on his face. "You forget that I am forbidden to touch pen to paper for a good while yet." He pronounced himself restless on this point before, but now seemed content, quite content.

Harrison remembered, apologized. "Though I thought you had been. Doing so, I mean."

"No, no. Devil a bit of it."

Harrison moved about on the heavy oaken settle. "Well, in that case, perhaps I— It is really too good a line to— Paper? Ink?"

"All the newpaper you want. Ink? Don't know if there's such a thing in the house." Harrison seemed faintly discomfited. Williams said that the lines would keep. "I shan't forget them. I have a good many more, you know, all up here," he tapped his brow. "They come to me in dreams, visions. Strolling through the rose garden, gently pushing away the crystal ball." And, in reply to his friend's inquiring look, he explained that, as he would lie abed, relishing the soon-to-be-expected slumber, sleep would (as it were) slowly approach in the form of a crystal ball, floating, floating slowly toward him. "And I, knowing that it will keep on coming no matter what may be, I take a sort of curious pleasure in pushing it away for a while. Once. Twice. Perhaps a third time. Then, finally, I allow it to snuggle close." He smiled. "Delicious."

"Excellent. Excellent."

But this excellence did not endure. By and by Harrison, coming into the sitting room one day, observed his friend to be walking back and forth, back and forth, restless, and, in fact, groaning. He started on seeing the visitor: "Eustace, what is wrong, my poor fellow?" "I cannot sleep, I cannot sleep, I lie awake, and then I have such sick and troubled fancies, and I get up and walk about, walk about, hoping to tire myself so that—"

Then it was Harrison who gave a start. Williams was indeed wearing the smoking jacket. But he was wearing it over his night-garment. "Surely, Eustace, you have not, I hope that you have not been pacing the floor since last night? Do not say, 'No, no.' Look: you are not yet dressed. Eustace."

Williams glanced at his attire, gaped, pressed his hands to his temples, groaned. "What can this mean?" asked Harrison. "And you gave me such a good account of the effects of the sleeping-draught—" Williams burst out laughing.

"The sleeping-draught! Of course! Edward! God bless you! Will you believe that I had forgotten to have it refilled! And that I had forgotten that I had forgotten!" The two friends laughed heartily at this. Then Williams said

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that he would dress at once and take care of the matter; but his friend raised a hand which protested this decision.

"Dress? By all means, dress. However, you are not to exert yourself: *I* shall go and have it refilled, this *is* it, here on the chimneypiece, is it not? Yes? Shan't be long." Then he clapped his hand to his own head. "Good Heavens, your forgetfulness is contagious! *Where* am I to refill it? Where is the chemist's?"

"Just round the corner to your left, second door down: *Jessup. Chemist.* At least I believe Grant said so."

Grant was quite correct. The chemist came out from his dispensing room, on his ruddy face, a smile of inquiry which ebbed a bit as he looked at the bottle Harrison set on the counter, requesting that it be refilled. "Directly...."

"Well, sir. Yes, sir. But do you think it altogether wise, sir?"

Harrison was surprised, and, in fact, rather put out, thinking of his afflicted friend waiting at home. "What do you mean, sir, 'Do I think it wise?' I have nothing to think about it, Doctor Douglass McFall has thought about it, *the* Doctor Douglass McFall; you are Mr. Jessup? Be so kind, Mr. Jessup, to let me have the mixture as before. Directly." Mr. Jessup was so kind, he came back directly, and he said no more except to say that that would be one and eightpence, sir.

Williams was already dressed, smiled cheerfully, took the bottle and replaced it on the chimneypiece, thanked Harrison very much; and then, some new thought occurring to him, said, "Edward, *would* you mind. This being the footman's day off" — the (mythical) footman was a favorite joke between them — "and Simmons being such a heavy, slow old thing, and I being so forgetful, and the steps so steep and dark, *would* you go down and ask her for the measuring glass? Then I needn't worry about its being here when I need it tonight."

The steps were indeed steep and dark, and Simmons, seated and staring into her own fire in her kitchen, was indeed a heavy, slow old thing. Eventually, however, she was able to focus her mind and to say that the measuring glass was on the night table next to Mr. Williams's bed; and from this declaration she would not budge; so Harrison went upstairs and repeated to his friend that Simmons had said ... what she had said. "No, it isn't," Williams said promptly. "While you were gone I found it there, over there. Silly old slattern; never mind." Suddenly his face changed, he repeated the words, "*Never mind?*" in such an entirely different tone of voice that Harrison was astonished, and, thinking that it was the woman's mistake which was bothering, said that Williams was not to be peevish—

He could, the next moment, have bitten his tongue; instead, said, "Forgive me, Eustace, of course you are not being peevish," but it was too late. The

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man *was* being peevish, suddenly took up several of the publications from the low table where they lay, waved them furiously in Harrison's face. "Don't be *peevish?* Never *mind?*" His voice rose, his teeth actually grated; almost, he ripped the magazines apart to open them before his friend's greatly troubled eyes. "Poetry? Do you call this *poetry?*" His breath trembled, his voice as well. "And as for *this*—" He held up an open page from an illustrated: "Is this worthy to be called *painting?* — And as for the characters of these men, which are too vile to—"

"Eustace ... Eustace...."

But now Eustace actually did rip them apart, or rather, he began to do so, but Harrison, pleading Tumbleton's embarrassment at having to excuse this to the librarian at the Museum, gently dissuaded him from any further destruction.

He also insisted on staying for dinner; then on taking Williams to a music hall, the nearest, the Vicereine. The Vicereine was the nearest, but it was nowhere near the best. Williams showed no pleasure in seeing and hearing the tunes, muttered, slumped in his seat, nodded off for a bit from time to time, groaned, awoke. "I perhaps should not have brought you here, Eustace, this is wretched stuff, not even third rate. Would you like to go?"

No: Williams, in a dreary voice, said that it was better watching a superannuated *artiste* than watching Buchanan's head. But after the curtain dropped on Madame Adelaida, or whatever she was called, he rose abruptly and made his way through the mostly empty row, with Harrison, taken by surprise, half-scuttling after him. He found him waiting, found him glaring, heard him saying, between clenched teeth, *"And as for Rossetti—!"*

It was easy to humor him, here. "Well, true, Eustace, true; Rossetti is not the thing nowadays, no one looks at his pictures, no one reads his poetry, the man is quite *démodé*. I quite agree." Williams became placid as he heard these words, the slightest touch of his arms persuaded him to move. At the door, with the voice of some aged buffoon comedian echoing dimly from within, he stopped. Turned to face his companion.

"Rossetti also tossed upon the bed of thorns and yet he too found the key to the rose garden, you know." He said this very quietly.

"But still," Tumbleton observed, some while later (it proved not then possible for the three to meet at once). "But still. Whilst in some ways certainly he is better than, say, after his first and even his second, ah, nervous crisis, in other ways, ah—"

"—he is worse," Grant finished. Grant was never patient with word-fumblings. "Furthermore, it is my opinion that he may be taking too much of that sleeping-draught. Don't know how many times I've refilled it for—"

"You! *You* have refilled it for him

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many times!" Tumbleton's face was half-astonished, half aghast. "Why, *I* have done so, I don't recall how often, but, ah, ah, *often*," he concluded hastily, in the face of Grant's awful glare.

Then it was Harrison's turn to speak about that.

It was agreed that McFall must be spoken to, and at once; they divided their forces: Tumbleton went to Harley Street, Harrison to the Borough, Grant to St. Olave's. Grant stopped first at Williams's, found him alternately snoring and muttering, shaving kit laid out but not used; removed the medicine bottle, stopped at the establishment of *Jessop. Chemist*, looked in at the private bar of the place near the hospital; finally ran down McFall, who was washing his hands in a basin on a cart, in one of the wards. He thrust the bottle at the physician, asked, sans preface, "What is in this sleeping-draught you prescribed for Williams?"

McFall looked at him from red-rimmed eyes, then looked at the bottle, dried his hands, took the bottle, then sniffed it, then held the besmeared label close. "Ah, yes. 'In it'? Basically, chloral and water."

"Chloral? Chloral. Good God. Isn't that the stuff that Coleridge and De Quincey both went stark mad from using?"

"No. No, no. That was laudanum. Tincture of opium. I did not say laudanum. Neither did I prescribe it for your friend. This is chloral, chloral hydrate, a synthetic; different sort of thing entirely ... though sometimes the effects of overuse: fantasy, hallucination, addiction ... what is this you are thrusting into my face now?"

This, on a billhead elaborately engraved *Jessup*, et cetera, was a list of dates and of the quantities of chloral dispensed to Williams on those dates. Jessup was probably not required to have provided this list to a layman, but Jessup had perhaps his reasons for doing so; besides, Grant was a great bully. McFall scanned the list, slowly. It was then his turn to say, "*Good God!*" After a moment more he said, more quietly, "He should not have been allowed to have had that much. How is he?"

Grant told him how Williams was. "And in addition to all that, he has developed a hatred, which I can only describe as maniacal, of every artist being exhibited and every poet being published, and has been writing letters on the sneak to the reviews and magazines and newspapers accusing them, these people, I mean, of every imaginable vice. Harrison suspected something when he saw ink stain on Williams's fingers, oh, a good while ago. Admitted, that jealousy is a very natural human emotion, still—"

McFall gave a very deep sigh. "Yes. 'Still.' Go on."

Grant did go on. He went on to say that Williams had first denied it all, then insisted that it was all true and that he acted out of public duty, then he had shrieked and babbled and wept

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said that all of it and much more had been revealed to him by what he called Buchanan's head.

"He called it — *what?*"

"Called it Buchanan's head. Said that first there was a sort of crystal ball in a rose garden, then gradually this had changed into a human head, says it spoke to him ... speaks to him ... tells him all these things, tells him that *x* is a fornicator and *y* is an adulterer and z is a pornographer, and so on and *so* on. Says he doesn't *know* how he knows it's *Buchanan's* head, just that he *knows*, nor does he know who 'Buchanan' is, and he must have the drug or he cannot sleep, which is horrible, and when he takes the drug, and he has taken more and more of it — What? 'Miracle that he is still alive?' — We must, I suppose, have you to thank for this miracle, Doctor Douglass McFall; yes, I am also 'sorry.' "

As for the appearance of the head, aside from there being no body attached to it, it was most remarkable for its expression of jealousy, malignancy, and hatred; also that it appeared to have been badly marred on one side; how, Williams could neither explain nor adequately describe. "What is to be done?" demanded Grant.

McFall began to walk away from the cart, Grant walking with him. " 'What is to be done,' indeed. If you had just now for the first time come and given me a description of such symptoms I should have prescribed complete rest and a total absence of nervous excitement. I should also have felt obliged to prescribe a sleeping-draught, chloral being the most effective one I know. What is to be done *now* ... either a private asylum, which is, if good, far from cheap, and, if cheap, far from good.... For, you see" — McFall stopped, faced Grant — "certainly he should have no more chloral. Certainly if it is cut off the results will be terrible. As for the public asylums ... Perhaps he should have a keeper, one who is with him all the time. Several, in fact: round the clock. No money for that? No money, no money. Death or the straight-waistcoat; pleasant alternatives. Sometimes, you know, Mr. Grant, there are questions to which the only answer seems to be that there is no answer. A personality constitutionally strong ... but when a personality is constitutionally weak — Ah well. If you believe that I have been remiss in my duties, you are at liberty to complain of me. Meanwhile, you may accompany me as I continue to attend to my patients. *If you wish.*" He walked off again.

Grant, after looking round the ward and at its many patients, and now for the first time listening to them as well, did not wish.

Along Upper Welchman Street there shambled — and finally stopped at the steps of the house and fumbled a ring of keys from his pocket, now and then mumbling a word or two to him-

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self — a stooped old man with a white beard; his silk hat was older, taller, than those worn by the three men at the top of the steps, and he wore a long silk coat: each clean enough, hat and coat, though showing, each, the signs of long, hard wear. Suddenly he looked up and noticed the group in the doorway, and, clearly, noticed something more about them than their presences alone.

"What! What!" he exclaimed, a look of more immediate distress replacing the one of general sadness on his face, hollowed cheeks and pouchy eyes. "Gentlemen.... Gentlemen.... What is wrong? What is wrong?"

Tumbleton took this as a signal for a heavy sigh. "I am afraid that you have lost your tenant, Mr. Solomon," he said; "and we, our friend."

Mr. Solomon lifted a thin hand as one who wards off a blow. "Blessed be the True Judge," he murmured. "Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh—"

"Do you quite understand what Mr. Tumbleton has just told you, Solomon? Mr. Williams has *died.* Sometime last night."

The much-brushed, much-worn old hat bobbed. "I understand, I understand. I understood at once. Poor young man, eh? Poor Mr. Williams. And I thought he was getting better. Better, I thought he was getting. His illness returned after all, then?" This question was asked in a tone not confident. There was a silence.

"Well, you are entitled to know the truth. And would find out in any event. I fear that while the balance of his mind was disturbed, poor Williams took his own life. There is no doubt about it at all."

Harrison burst out, "Poor Eustace! It is ghastly!" His voice broke.

This time the old man lifted both hands. His face was horrified. "God help us! God have mercy on him. *Imbeshreer!*" He tottered a moment, took hold of the railing, steadied himself, moved hesitantly. "What should I do? Should I go inform the— Can I—" They beckoned him, and he went slowly up the steps. "Eh?"

Tumbleton: The fact is ... The fact is....

Solomon: Have you notified? He has family? What a shock for them. A, a priest? A minister? An undertaker, at least?

Grant (waves all this away): Harrison's "*fact*" is that Williams did it in his own bed and everything is drenched with blood. He should never have been allowed to shave himself.

The old man bared his teeth, drew in a hissing breath.

"There's not a clean sheet to be found," said Grant; "all the linens must have gone to the wash and not come back. The housekeeper has already gotten herself sodden with gin and is of no use at all. So we've covered him with a sort of tarpaulin we found out back, the coroner cannot come just yet, there's a policeman in there now — and the rest must wait. Family? An

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aunt in Wales, somewhere."

The old man said that a tarpaulin was not enough. "That's not a proper covering for anyone, a tarpaulin. Something better I must have upstairs in the storeroom. Must be. Let me think. Let me look."

Tumbleton said he was just about to suggest that. Grant growled, "You'll never be able to use it again, whatever it is; what? 'never mind that?' Then by all means go up and look." They turned and went into the hallway and toward the stairs to the upper floor. Harrison suddenly sat on the bench beneath the mirror, said he would wait.

Lighting the gas on each landing in the dark house, the old man laboriously climbed, talked on, talked on. "Poor Mr. Williams, these are terrible times we live in, gentlemen; murders, massacres, famines, plagues; poor man, I thought he was getting better: *why*? 'This new medicine helps me sleep,' he said, but that was last quarter day, more or less; terrible, terrible; the Shechinah is in exile and the Daughter of the Voice rings out, rings out, but we do not hear it, *'Repent! Repent!'* but we hear it not, we don't want to hear it, we don't want to repent; where is the key, the key, this one? no not this one. Mr. Williams! Aye! At length the storeroom door was opened, it opened onto darkness and, another gas jet being lit (one without a mantle: high and red it flared, then was turned lower), onto clutter beyond cataloging; the old man stood in a narrow way between items covered and uncovered, and he talked on. "—a terrible thing to be an artist today, gentlemen, and yet a fascination it has which cannot be denied; six or seven of the best, the leading artists of today—" He fumbled here and there, seemed sure of nothing. "—live in mansions and they lunch with lords, Sir Laurence, Sir John, the incomparable Landseer, Mr. Holman-Hunt who did *The Scapegoat*, he visited the Holy Land, what a blessed privilege, and how many others? a few others only" — he peered here and there around the crowded room — "and the rest? Poverty, decay, and worse. Making likenesses, perhaps it's not allowed, God says, what does God say? 'Thou shalt not make—' My cousin Simeon, you may have heard of my cousin Simeon, let me remove a dust sheet here, sir—"

Grant said, impatiently, that a dust sheet would do. "But not a *dusty* dust sheet, Mr. Grant, sir; look: ah...." Underneath the dusty one was a clean one, and underneath that something showed purple and gold. "My cousin Simeon was an artist, and a good one, too, and now look at him, or better yet don't; 'Here comes Moses,' he says when I visit him, which is perhaps not as often as— 'Moses, with another half-crown and another half-drawsha, who needs your damned drawshas, Moses, a fig for your sermons and your *Shema Beni*, why don't you bring us a half-sovereign instead, Moses?' —because he

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would immediately convert it into drink, gentlemen, if not worse, gentlemen, a terrible disgrace for a family to have a drunkard ... and worse: look." The dust sheets came off, one after the other; the old man carefully lifted up some heavy broad piece of stuff—"*This* would be nice for Mr. Williams, poor young man, poor young man. *Aye!*"

"Purple velvet!" exclaimed Tumbleton. "A gorgeous pall!"

Grant said he expected it was only velveteen.

"Beautiful gold bordering! Poor Williams would have admired—"

"Tosh, it can't be real gold, can't have real value, but it will do, hand it over, Solomon."

The old man said that everything which had to do with art had value, though seldom, he feared, to the benefit of the artist. "Sundry odds and ends I sold to Mr. Dante Gabriel when—"

"*Rossetti?*" exclaimed Tumbleton.

"Mr Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a great artist, and sundry items here I bought back, after he died, a great poet he was, too; shame on them who said he wrote shameful poems, who—"

Grant swore, tugged the heavy purple cloth away. "Tumbleton, stay here listening to this babble if you like, I'm going down to lay this over Williams, damned pitiful poor fool; stopped *trying.*" They could hear his footsteps clump heavily and rapidly upon the stairs, slow down as he entered the bedroom below.

The old man lingeringly pulled the dust sheets back. "I came for this picture frame," he said, lifting it. "Only for this I came. And what did I find? May such a thing not happen to any of us, Mr. Williams, Mr. Williams! But let us not open Satan's mouth, lest he accuse us."

Tumbleton seemed by his glances here and there not eager to remain, but he seemed not eager to go below, either; certainly he did not wish to be alone. "So you knew Rossetti, eh?"

The old silk hat nodded, nodded. "Mr. William Rossetti, a kind gentleman. Miss Christina Rossetti, a very fine poet. Mr. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, I knew him best, a great artist, beautiful paintings he made, from my religion and from your religion; and poems as well. They say, some people say, he died of a sudden disease, other people say he died of a medicine of which he gradually took too great a quantity, so what was it? Opium? Not opium, what then, who remembers? Coral, why do I say 'coral,' coral is not a medicine, he could not sleep well, years and years he could not sleep, some wretched fellow broke his heart, said he wrote a shameful poem, poems, about love; they were beautiful poems, like Shir Ha-Shirim, Solomon's Song, is what they were like; look—"

He bent, he arose, he held something in his hand. "A skull!" cried Tumbleton, recoiled; said, "Not a skull," drew near again; the old man blew and blew, dust flew about, his

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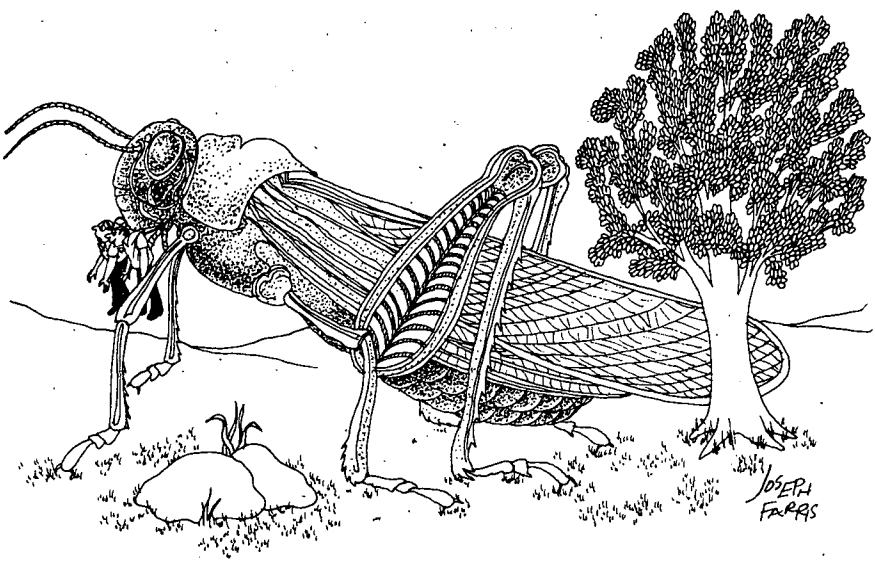
thin beard fluttered, the gas flame trembled.

"A bust. I say, Mr. Solomon: a bust of *whom?*"

The old man nodded, nodded. "A plaster mold he was making; maybe, Mr. Dante Gabriel, almost the last thing he made, it may be. 'For this, Moses,' he said, 'I need no model, the man's malignant features haunt me forever.' His very words. See. What hate, eh? Jealous, jealous, hateful and malignant jealous, some penny journalist who made a great scandal out of envy of the great Mr. Dante Gabriel; with one hand who gave it such a blow, at last, the plaster was still wet: look—" He turned the object so the side misshapen might be seen.

Tumbleton seemed sickened, looked at the door, looked back. Asked, "But who? *Who?*"

A moment's thought. A long moment. "Who. His name. Let us not open Satan's mouth, lest.... Ah, yes. His name? Buchanan, his name. This is Buchanan's head. Look."



"Hawkins! Do you realize what a find this is?"

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Catherine McKinlay is a transplanted Canadian who now lives in Los Angeles. Her first published story concerns two men on a space station who are hosts to an alien emissary who happens to be the most beautiful creature either has ever seen.

Xessex

BY

M. CATHERINE McKINLAY

Templeton asked hesitantly, after a glance at the unpronounceable five-word name on the manifest, "What may we call you?" In the dim light of the Station control room he smoothed a self-conscious scarred hand over his forest-green uniform jacket.

"You may call me Raj." The voice was light, musical, the words formed with awkwardness.

The Phaetan had come aboard Aries Station with proper credentials so far as Templeton could see; but he could concentrate on verification scan for only a few seconds at a time. Farlan, assigned to check the computer spec sheets, also stood transfixed and staring, boots seeming rooted to the stalamac floor.

"Raj," repeated Templeton.

"Yes, Commander," said Raj, supernaturally blue eyes drifting over to fix burningly upon Farlan. "Monitor from Phaeta, by order of Godden, for one rote." The words were uttered as if memorized.

Released from the Phaetan's gaze, Templeton said with more assurance, "Everything has passed scan."

"Yes. And what are you called?" Raj inquired of Templeton's partner.

"N ... Neal Farlan." Farlan cleared his throat and clasped his hands behind him, shiny black boots scuffing harshly on the metallic floor. "Neal Farlan, ma'am."

"Ma'am? What ia ma'am? I was not taught such a word. My name is Raj."

The Phaetan was distinctly female in appearance, and surpassingly beautiful, the most beautiful creature Templeton had ever seen. Clad in a simple gold-edged scarlet tunic — perhaps a ceremonial costume, as were their own green Space Service jackets — Raj was slender, statuesque, exquisitely curv-

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ed. Cobalt-blue eyes were fringed with thick blonde eyelashes; shoulder-length spun gold hair framed high cheekbones, a thin straight nose, and lips as tenderly shaped as the tiny ferns Templeton grew in the humid greenhouse of Aries Station.

"Excuse — I didn't mean to offend—" Farlan, mottled red with embarrassment, stammered further apology, wide dark eyes fastened on the golden apparition.

Templeton, realizing that Raj had not asked his name, looked on with a grin. Then he stared incredulously as the Phaetan's silken skin flushed from its pale ivory color into glowing peach. He found his voice as Farlan, also gaping, faltered into silence. "We've heard little of your planet, other than it recently sealed agreement with ExxTel as a primary source of biurnium ore."

"Yes," said Raj, and continued in a pleasing lilt, "We do not travel much, or for long. Our lovely planet is dark. We do not react well to light. In light we are ... as you, when you are in water. That problem can be easily solved, of course. But being off our world for longer than a rote or two at very most seems to cause within us—" Raj paused and gestured gracefully. "—psychic damage."

"I see," Templeton said, and grinned again in the twilight dimness of Aries Station. 'Do many others on your world ... look like you?"

Raj considered him for a moment and then responded as if to an utterly preposterous question, "Of course." With an ineffably sweet smile at Farlan, Raj extended a slender hand with long tapering fingers tipped with silver fingernails. "Nealfarlan, would you bring me to my ... quarters?"

"Of ... of course." Farlan took the delicate hand as if he had been given an eggshell to hold. "Neal, call me Neal."

The Phaetan had turned roseate pink, and gazed at Farlan with rapidly blinking gold eyelashes. Templeton thought, If Raj isn't flirting I never saw flirting before in my life. Good luck, he thought with amusement. You'll need it with a Trad like Farlan.

Farlan asked in a voice that crackled with anxiety, "Sir, may I have your permission to escort our guest?"

"Have I ... gone against custom?" Raj asked, blue gaze enveloping both men.

As Commander of Aries Station, it was Templeton's prerogative to accord the hospitality of ExxTel to its guests — the few there ever were. He said, "Not at all, Raj. Customs here are no matter. I'll finish up the specs," he added to Farlan, and dropped one eyelid in a half-wink.

Farlan scowled in response and turned away, to Raj.

Closed-minded young fool, Templeton thought for an innumerable time, and watched them: Farlan, tall and lean and broad-shouldered, dark hair fluttering around the collar of his green jacket as he strode down the corridor; and Raj, slender and golden,

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arm through Farlan's, swaying with the grace of a willow on Earth, the Earth Templeton had put out of his mind.

He finished up the specs, concentrating on his task, and limped over to the monitors. From the status readouts he could see that the *Comstock* was almost loaded, a matter of a dozen of so hours before it would automatically disengage and journey to Moon Station. It would take approximately one rote — equivalent to not quite seven Earth days — to unload the twenty ExxTel transport ships from Phaeta, including the command ship which had carried Raj, and reload the biurnium on the *Kimberly*.

Odd, he thought. Odd that such a responsible command should be entrusted to so delicate a creature. But then he knew very well that there were many permutations in the galaxy. Perhaps the "male" equivalent on Raj's planet was similar to the ethereal intellectual elite on Nexus-five, totally lacking in corporeal substance except for the means and will to procreate through selected brood partners. Perhaps that was the reason for Raj's immediate and unmistakable interest in the youthful, virile Farlan.

Flashing red light from a screen caught his eye. He had evaluated the problem before the soft hooting of the trouble siren echoed in the control room. Shifting cargo had knocked one of the unloading robots into such a position that it could not right itself. He tapped instructor keys with certainty, and an extractor claw deftly removed offending bars of spilled biurnium so that an android could right the robot and reset the controls. The red light vanished; the siren cut off.

He took little satisfaction in his accomplishment, reflecting placidly that the simplest computer could have activated the same assembly line repair. Indeed, a simple computer would have prevented the only major production "accident" that had ever occurred on Aries Station. From ExxTel's point of view, the accident that befell Templeton could have happened *only* to a man. True, a basic defect in the Station's construction had allowed seepage of fantacid, but a robot or android would have completed the repairs in a fraction of the time; no damage would have been done like the infection to his face and leg.

"Symbiotic organism," the doctors had said of his fantacid-infected body when he had finally been treated. "Harmless, unless we disturb it."

And so Aries Station had become his home. He had reasoned that if he took ExxTel to court and won all the money on Earth, what good would it be to him? As the ancient nursery rhyme so aptly said, All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Gray Templeton back together again. And in exchange for waiver of his legal rights, ExxTel was willing to leave him here, provided he passed the biannual psych tests.

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Here he was insulated from the emotional blows he would have suffered on Earth from his disfigurement; he was comfortable, sufficiently amused by the entertainment modes, well taken care of. Other wants and needs he had put firmly out of his mind.

He knew he performed a function of some value, although he was cynically aware that men and women were no longer really needed in space. Alien contact and the resulting severe convulsions had insured that. With interplanetary travel almost entirely trade, and accomplished by robot ship with communication and data transmitted by computer, a Station Commander's prime function was fulfilled when aberrant worlds occasionally declared themselves enemy and launched attack; then the Commanders transmitted early warning information until they were flamed into oblivion.

ExxTel did not publicize the fact that Aries Station had had to be rebuilt nine times in the two-century interval before Templeton's arrival. But ExxTel lavishly praised its Space Service: YOU ARE ELITE, YOU ARE HEROES, YOU WHO WEAR THE FOREST GREEN OF EARTH AND WORK IN THE VASTNESS OF SPACE. ...

Templeton smiled ruefully. He was a brightly plumaged security guard who watched over a glorified warehouse. He would someday probably die out here, his name his only legacy, etched somewhere on a list of forgotten heroes.

He took some satisfaction from overseeing the bright young people assigned here for various reasons by ExxTel. Bright, promising young people. Except for Farlan. Templeton winced, thinking about Farlan and the Trads.

Other world civilizations had reverted to their own versions of dark ages upon alien contact, reviving ancient rites and customs in fierce determination to maintain their identity and the moral history of their worlds; and so also on Earth such a sect had formed. The Traditionalists. Patterned in behavior and belief after an era Templeton considered barbaric: pre-twentieth century.

Farlan had been recruited into the Service in spite of his fanatical beliefs, because of his mathematical genius. But Templeton was convinced that the intolerant Trads were misfits anywhere in the Space Service, whatever their gifts. Midway in his three-month tour of duty, Farlan was a stalamac-headed bore and a constant irritant as far as Templeton was concerned; but he intended to be fair. He had seen no reason thus far to turn in anything but a favorable report.

Templeton returned his thoughts to a more pleasurable concern, the Phaetan visitor. As usual, ExxTel had supplied a paucity of information. The laconic message from headquarters at Pacifica had read: PHAETAN EMMISSARY. APPROVAL GODDEN, ETA 0250301. EARTH TYPE. USUAL COURTESIES.

Earth-type indeed, snorted Temple-

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ton, and punched in a computer query. He read impatiently but thoroughly through the data blipping across the screen, and extracted the facts that Phaeta was Earth-size, heavily clouded, with ivory vegetation, high H_2O content and almost constant misty precipitation, no ocean covering equivalent to Earth's, but multitudinous large bodies of water. The high land mass was heavy in biurnium element, ranging from six to ten percent.

CULTURAL DATA read the next heading. Lines of print flowed across the screen.

MATURATION LEVEL NINE

LIFE-EXPECTANCY LEVEL EIGHT

TECHNOLOGY LEVEL TEN PLUS RESTRICTED

POPULATION LEVEL STABLE FIVE

NON-MONOGAMOUS HUMANOID TO FACTOR NINETY-FOUR POINT TWO

"Hmpf," said Templeton, rubbing his damaged face.

VEGETARIAN

TELESTHESIA-DEVELOPMENT LEVEL THREE

Now *that* is *damn* interesting, thought Templeton. Raj reads feelings — not thought — and from a distance. Interesting.

THEOLOGY LEVEL ONE

"Pantheists," Templeton interpreted nodding approvingly.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY LEV

He canceled the program. "Seems like a nice little planet so far," he said aloud, grinning at the screen. "Why ruin my illusions?"

* * *

At dinner Templeton made laborious conversation. Raj, bare-shouldered in a clinging pale green garment, had brought food, of course, and ate an assortment of ivory-colored leaves and bean-shaped vegetables with two curved implements reminiscent of ancient Chinese chopsticks, wielding them with dextrous grace. Farlan was monosyllabic, scraping his fork unseeingly over the contents of his plate as he stared at Raj; his face was pale and drawn with tension, mottling with red when the caressing blue gaze flowed over him. Raj's silken skin blended through shades of amber. Templeton picked his way carefully through simple subjects, mostly the tropical features of Phaeta.

Farlan blurted unexpectedly, "Do you have a husband?"

Raj's gold eyelashes blinked in bewilderment.

"Mate. Uh, partner." Farlan groped for other synonyms as Raj gazed. "Does someone ... stay with you, live with you?"

"Ah." Raj brightened to a cherry pink. "No. But we do not live as you live ... together. It is different."

"Yes. I expect it is. It doesn't matter anyway." Farlan rose and said unhappily, "Please excuse me. I have ... duties. Forgive me." He walked stiffly from the room, squaring his broad shoulders. Templeton looked at him with a mixture of pity and disgust.

"I do not understand," Raj said, re-

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verting to pale ivory which seemed to be the Phaetan's normal quiescent color.

"I don't wonder. Yes," he added, seeing that Raj would not comprehend his colloquialism.

"Neal desires me. I am able to know that is true."

"Yes," Templeton said, remembering the Phaetan's telesthetic capacity.

"Why does Neal not permit me to grant desire?"

He said, astounded, "You're willing to?"

"I know of your body structure. It was part of my briefing. I am able to."

"With an *Earthman?* You're *willing* to?"

"Neal has desire."

"It doesn't always work quite that way on our world. Desire doesn't always lead to. ..."

Tinkling silvery laughter expressed Raj's derision for this peculiar behavior. "This is part of your ... courtship pattern!"

"Not always." Templeton leaned his head to one side, thrust his good leg forward at a cocky angle, and grinned. "I'm willing. I have desire for you, too, even if I'm ugly."

"Not ugly." With an elegant gesture at Templeton's disfigured face and leg, Raj said, "Hurt, not ugly. But you do not have the desire like Neal. It is ... interest only. You are content as you are."

Silenced, Templeton comtemplated Raj, tucking his legs back under him. My face and leg aren't the only dead parts of me, he thought.

The cobalt eyes, objective, held his. He realized that Raj had not altered in color since Farlan had left.

"The changing tones of your skin," he said to deflect Raj's disturbing attention. "Is that part of *your* courtship pattern?"

"What we feel is spoken truly with the colors of our bodies," Raj said simply. "We have no need for some of your words."

"I see." Templeton felt oddly chastened.

"Explain to me please about Neal."

"I'll try." He searched for simple words, concepts. "It's our culture, but a step backward into our past culture. A sect on my world called Traditionalists. They demand that all people have one way of living, one way of belief, one mate, one God which judges and condemns."

"Do you think—" Raj paused. "Do you think Neal ... will become well?"

As Templeton roared with laughter, the Phaetan appeared taken aback. "Perhaps," he said. "I don't know. He's young."

Raj rose, willow-graceful. "I will go to Neal."

"Good luck."

Raj turned back inquiringly.

"A wish that good things will happen," Templeton said.

Raj smiled.

Before he turned in, Templeton went as usual into the greenhouse.

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Through the leafy ferns and plants he saw Farlan with Raj's slender body clasped in his arms, his dark eyes sulfurous with desire. Raj's arms were wound around his shoulders, fingers stroking his neck, his hair. Raj's body pulsated waves of deepening rose.

Raj murmured indecipherably. "Yes," said Farlan in a husky rasp.

Templeton ducked behind a row of ferns as they left, an arm around each other, Farlan's hand caressing down over the voluptuous curve of hip. Templeton grinned, and limped over to inspect his newest ferns. That damn alien is right, he conceded. I've finally managed not to need a thing. Not a thing.

The next day period Farlan did not appear. There was a note in the control room:

> Have advised Pacifica am returning on the *Comstock*.
>
> Farlan

The freighter had already departed; Templeton switched on the communicator, dialed the *Comstock's* frequency. The figure on the screen was in space gear; there was no reason for ExxTel to provide oxygen atmosphere in its robot-manned freighters.

"I have nothing to say," Farlan said with cold finality.

Templeton demanded, "I have a right to know what happened between you and Raj, whether that creature is dangerous."

Farlan did not respond, his dark imperviglas headgear motionless.

"You've ruined your career." Templeton's voice was harsh, factual.

"I don't care. I've decided Trads don't belong in the Space Service anyway."

Templeton thought, I hope you make ExxTel realize that. But he argued with the unresponsive Farlan, continued to argue with him intermittently, feeling it was his duty, until the *Comstock* was outside recall frequency. He could not have recalled the *Comstock* anyway for other than a Phase IV emergency, and the return of a misguided young genius could hardly qualify. But it would look better for the young man's future if his report could state that Farlan had changed his mind or at least regretted his act.

He signed off and sought Raj in the command cabin of the transport vessels. The Phaetan, clad in a tunic of ice blue, sat in motionless austere beauty, gazing into the star-specked blackness.

Templeton dropped heavily into a seating module. "What happened?"

"I do not know," Raj said sadly.

Templeton smothered a snort of impatience. "I saw you in the greenhouse, how the two of you were. What happened?"

"In my quarters there was merging of our naked bodies," Raj said in a musical voice. "The rapture of Neal took me to the furthest spectrum of color."

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"I see," Templeton said, disconcerted. He cleared his throat. "Then what happened?"

"I said to Neal that such complete fusion between bodies was rare on my world and resulted in the begetting of young."

"Aaahhh," breathed Templeton, his gaze sweeping in alarm over the elegant female form before him.

"Neal said the same. Neal was—" Raj's hands made motions of agitation.

"Upset. Disturbed," supplied Templeton. "I can well imagine."

"Truly. He asked then would I be procreating." Raj trilled with laughter.

"But you said—"

"It is the other members of my species which are in appearance like you who procreate."

Templeton leaped to his feet. "You mean you're a *man*?"

Raj's forehead knitted faintly. "Yes, I am by your definition male. Neal also asked that question and was—" Raj's hands again made agitated motions.

Templeton sat down again.

Raj said, "Male. Female. This is important ... in your culture?"

"To a Trad. Don't concern yourself."

"I have been ... in sorrow."

"Don't be, any more. I'm sure ... I'm sure—" Templeton stumbled over his words. "Well, you're a very special — you're kind."

"You are also ... kind."

The cobalt blue eyes on his seemed molten. Templeton asked haltingly, "Do you think ... that's all I can ever be?"

"No," Raj said, and turned from him to again contemplate the starry universe.

He went back to his quarters, and sat on his bed. And laughed for a while because he didn't know what else to do. Then he lay back, hands behind his head, and reflected, and imagined, releasing the aspect of his being he had frozen away for many years. His thoughts became more and more vivid.

He sat up and dialed the command vessel. "Would you have dinner with me, Raj?"

"Of course." Raj added softly, 'I believe I can also arrange to come to Aries Station for a rote or two from time to time."

Templeton looked more closely at his vidiscreen and with a rush of joy saw that Raj was a warm shade of blushing pink.

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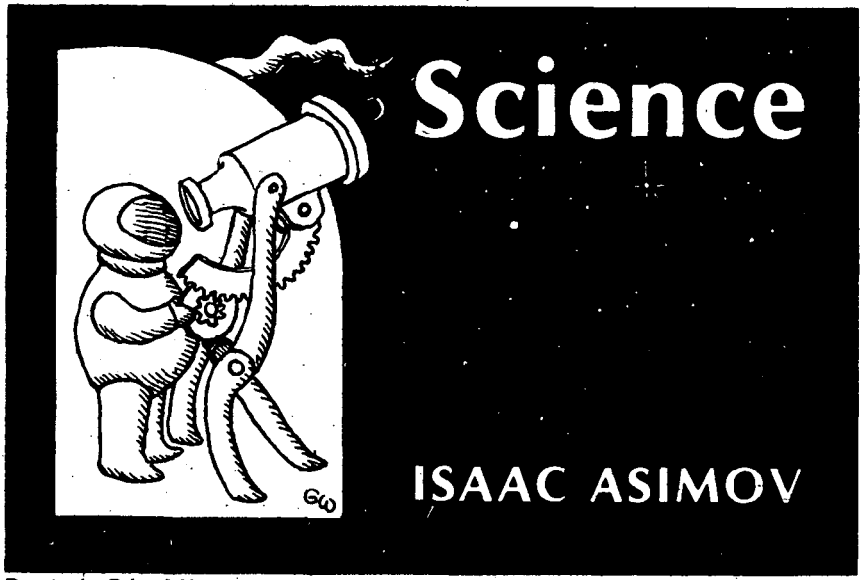

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

READY AND WAITING

I have just returned from an "Astronomy Island" cruise to Bermuda. The idea is to visit a site on that beautiful island where we can gaze at various objects in its clear sky through a variety of telescopes set up by one or another of the enthusiasts who have come.

It is always the sky of July or August, with the week carefully chosen for the absence of the Moon. Scorpio is always prominent in the southern sky, winding its S-shaped way down toward the horizon.

Immediately below and to its left (from our vantage-point) are eight stars that mark out a perfect tea kettle to my eyes, and that is Sagittarius. At the star marking the spout of the tea kettle, the Milky Way curls up and to the left, like faint steam.

That site in Sagittarius is the brightest part of the Milky Way, and if you stare in that direction, you are staring toward the center of the Galaxy.

It's rather exciting to know that even though you can't see through the dust clouds, somewhere out there — right in the direction your eyes are gazing — there is a region of unimaginable turbulence that includes, in all likelihood, an enormously massive black hole.

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And yet, ever and anon, my eyes would turn to Antares, the brightest star in the constellation Scorpio, and I would watch it fixedly for a while.

Maybe— Maybe— Maybe—

The chances were one in a large number of trillions that anything would happen to it while I watched, but, just in case, I wanted to be ready and waiting.

But, of course, nothing ever happened.

What is it I expect? Well, let's begin at the beginning.

About 130 B.C., the Greek astronomer Hipparchus prepared the first star catalog. He listed nearly 850 stars, using the names they were then given, and gave their latitude and longitude with respect to the ecliptic (the path followed by the Sun against the starry background) and the Sun's particular position at the vernal equinox.

Why did he do it? According to the Roman author Pliny, writing two centuries later, it was because he had "discovered a new star."

Mind you, before the invention of the telescope, it was taken for granted by almost all star-gazers that the stars were all visible to people with acute vision. The notion of an invisible star seemed like a contradiction in terms. If it was invisible, it wasn't a star.

Yet stars vary in brightness, and most of them are so dim they are difficult to see. Might it not be possible that some — a few, at least — were so dim that they could not be made out at all by human eyesight, however acute? To us, today, thinking about it with the brilliance of hindsight, the possibility seems so overwhelmingly logical that we wonder how anyone could fail to see it.

The trouble is that, until about four and a half centuries ago, human beings lived in a homocentric Universe, and firmly believed that everything in the Universe had been created only in order to exert some effect on human beings. (Most human beings live in such a Universe even today.)

People might argue that the stars existed only because they were so beautiful that they pleased our eyes and stirred us to wonder and romance.

Or, to be more utilitarian, they might argue that the stars formed a complex cryptogram, against which movable objects, such as the Sun, the Moon, planets, comets, and meteors, marked out paths from which hints for human guidance could be obtained.

Or, to be more lofty, they might argue the stars were intended to stir the soul to a sense of its own unworthiness and to give hints of the existence of a transcendent entity beyond human grasp or understanding. ("The

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heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork." Psalm 19:11)

In a homocentric Universe, it simply makes no sense to imagine an invisible star. What would be its purpose? Being unseen, it couldn't serve either estheticism, utilitarianism, or religion.

Yet Hipparchus, having gazed at the heavens sufficiently and having spent enough time plotting the position of the planets against the starry background to know the pattern of the thousand brightest stars by heart, looked at the night sky and saw a star that hadn't been there the last time he had looked.

He could only assume it was a *new* star, one that was freshly formed. And only temporarily, too, for eventually it vanished again. (Pliny doesn't say so, but we can be sure it did.)

It must have seemed to Hipparchus that such a heavenly intrusion was a notable event, and he must have wondered if it happened frequently. To be sure, there had been no prior reports of new stars, but such a silent insertion might simply have gone unnoticed. Few knew the heavens as Hipparchus did, and a slight irregularity would pass unheeded. So he prepared his catalog, in order that some future star-gazer, at the merest suspicion of novelty, might consult it to see if a star was actually supposed to exist at the position one had been sighted.

Occasionally, though infrequently, new stars were noted in the centuries after Hipparchus. A particularly noticeable one appeared in the constellation Cassiopeia on November 11, 1572. A 25-year-old Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe, observed it carefully and wrote a 52-page book concerning it which made him, at once, the most famous astronomer in Europe.

Tycho (he is usually known by his first name) gave the book a long title which is usually boiled down to "Concerning the New Star." Since he wrote in Latin, however, the title should really be "De Nova Stella." From that time to this, a "new star" has been called a "nova," which is the Latin word for "new."*

And then, in 1609, Galileo constructed his first telescope, turned it on the heavens and noted at once that it brightened each star in appearance,

**The Latin plural is "novae," but a steadily lessening interest in Latinic minutiae has led to "novas" as the usual plural. We also say "formulas" instead of "formulae" and any day I expect to hear people speaking of "two memorandums".*

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and that many stars, too dim to see ordinarily, were brightened into visibility by it. There were, he found, numerous invisible stars in existence, greater in number than the visible stars were. If any one of them happened to brighten sufficiently, for any reason, it would become visible to the unaided eye and, in pre-telescope days, would appear to be a "new" star.

In 1596, for instance, the German astronomer David Fabricius had noted a third magnitude star, in the constellation of Cetus, which faded and eventually disappeared. He considered it another temporary star that had come and gone, as those of Hipparchus and Tycho had. In the course of the next century, however, the star was seen in the same place on several occasions. With the use of the telescope it was found to be there at all times, but to vary irregularly in brightness. At its dimmest, it could not be seen by the unaided eye, but it could brighten to different degrees of visible brilliance and, in 1779, it even temporarily reached the first magnitude mark. It came to be called "Mira" ("wonderful") though its more systematic name is Omicron Ceti.

Nowadays, any star is classified as a nova if it brightens sharply and suddenly, though it may be so dim to begin with that even at its brightest it remains invisible to the unaided eye. Stars may also brighten and dim *regularly*, but they are then "variable stars" and are not considered novas.

Now that we have the telescope to help us, novas are not the marvel and rarity they once were. About 25 per year occur in our Galaxy on the average, though most are hidden from us since dust clouds keep us from seeing all but our own corner of the Galaxy.

Generally, a nova comes without warning and is detected only after it has suddenly brightened. I don't think anyone has ever happened to be watching a star and to have actually caught it begin to brighten. Once it has brightened and been detected, however, it can be observed after it has faded out to what, presumably, it was before.

More and more such "post-novas" were studied, and, by the 1950's, it was clear that every one of them, without exception, was a close binary. Novas were found to be a pair of stars circling a common center of gravity, and so close to each other as to involve considerable tidal influence. One of the pair was always a white dwarf, the other a normal star.

What happened was plain. The tidal influence of the white dwarf on its ordinary partner pulled hydrogen-rich matter out of the latter. This matter would form a ring about the white dwarf, and the matter would slowly spiral in toward it. As the matter approached the white dwarf, it would be subjected to an intensifying gravitational pull that would condense it and

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produce hydrogen fusion within it. The white dwarf would always shine a bit brighter than it would if unaccompanied, because of the sparkling of the hydrogen cloud stolen from its companion star.

Every once in a while, however, unusually large gouts of matter would leak over from the main-sequence star (because of unusual activity on its surface, no doubt) and a relatively huge amount of hydrogen would descend upon the white dwarf or else the supply of steadily descending hydrogen would accumulate to an explosive point. The resulting explosion would supply many times the light that the white dwarf itself could deliver and, as seen from Earth, the star would suddenly become much brighter than it had been. And then, of course, the hydrogen supply would eventually be consumed and the star would fade back to what it had been before — until the next large delivery.

That's not all there is to the story, though.

In 1885, a star was seen in the central regions of what was then known as the Andromeda nebula, a place where no star had been visible before. It lingered on for a period of time, then slowly faded and disappeared. At its peak, it was not quite bright enough to be seen by the unaided eye, and it was considered a rather poor specimen. That it was bright enough to deliver nearly as much light as the entire Andromeda nebula did was not considered important.

But suppose the Andromeda nebula was not a relatively near-by collection of dust and gas (as most astronomers then supposed) but was a very distant collection of stars, one that was as large and as complex as our own Galaxy. Some astronomers suspected *that.*

In the 1910's, an American astronomer, Heber Doust Curtis, studied the Andromeda nebula and began to observe tiny brightenings that took place within it. These he attributed to novas. If the Andromeda nebula was very distant, the stars within it would be so exceedingly faint as seen from Earth that the nebula would appear as a mere fog. The novas would brighten to the point where they could be made out individually in a good telescope but would still be exceedingly faint as compared to the stars of our own Galaxy.

Curtis spotted large numbers of novas in the Andromeda nebula, dozens of times as many as would appear in the same time in other similarly-sized patches of sky. His conclusion was that the nebula was indeed a galaxy and contained so many stars that the novas among them would be numerous. He turned out to be right. The Andromeda galaxy (as it is now known) is about 700,000 parsecs away, over 30 times as far away from us

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as the farthest star in our own Galaxy.

In that case, how could the nova of 1885 have nearly achieved unaided-eye brightness? In 1918, Curtis suggested that the nova of 1885 was an exceptional, extraordinarily bright nova. In fact, if the Andromeda nebula was really a galaxy as large as our own, then the nova of 1885 was shining with all the brilliance of an entire galaxy, and was many billions of times as luminous (temporarily) as our Sun. Ordinary novas are only a few hundred thousand times as luminous (temporarily) as our Sun.

In the 1930's, the Swiss astronomer Fritz Zwicky made a painstaking search for other-galaxy novas that blazed up to galactic brilliance and he called this extra bright breed "supernovas." (The nova of 1885 is now called "S Andromedae," the S standing for supernova.)

Whereas a nova can repeat many times, doing so each time it accumulates a large supply of hydrogen from its companion star, the supernovas are one-shots.

A supernova is a large star that has consumed all the fuel at its core and that can no longer maintain itself against the pull of its own gravity. It has no alternative, then, but to collapse. As it does so, the kinetic energy of inward motion is converted to heat, and the hydrogen that still exists in its outer regions is heated and compressed to the point where fusion reactions are ignited. All the hydrogen goes more or less at once, and the star explodes and, giving off all its energy supply in a very short time, temporarily brightens to a glow that rivals that of a whole galaxy of ordinary stars.

What is left of the star after the explosion collapses to a tiny neutron star and, of course, never explodes again.

Supernovas are much more rare than ordinary novas, as you might well suspect. At most, there would be one supernova for every 250 or so ordinary novas. In a galaxy the size of ours, there might be one every ten years, but most of them would be hidden by dust clouds lying between the explosion and ourselves. Perhaps once every three centuries or so, a supernova would take place in the relatively small corner of our Galaxy that is visible to our eyes and our optical telescopes.

Naturally, supernovas are much more spectacular than novas when the two are seen at comparable distances. The question, then, is this: Has a supernova ever been viewed in our own corner of the Galaxy?

The answer is, yes!

The "new star" viewed by Tycho was undoubtedly a supernova. It brightened rapidly until it was brighter than Venus! It was visible in the daytime and, by night, cast a faint shadow. It stayed very bright for a cou-

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ple of weeks and remained visible to the naked eye for a year and a half before fading altogether out of sight.

In 1604, another supernova flared and was observed by the German astronomer Johann Kepler. It was not as bright as Tycho's supernova, for it never grew brighter than the planet Mars. But then, Kepler's supernova was farther away than Tycho's had been.

This meant that two supernovas blazed brightly down on Earth within a space of 32 years. If Tycho, who died in 1601 at the age of 54, had lived three more years, he would have seen both of them.

And yet (such is the irony of events) in nearly 400 years since then, *not one local supernova has showed up.* Astronomers' tools have advanced unbelievably — telescopes, spectroscopes, cameras, radio telescopes, satellites — but no supernovas. The closest one visible since 1604 was S Andromedae.

Were there any supernovas *before* Tycho's?

Yes, indeed. In 1054 (possibly on July 4, in a remarkable celebration in advance) a supernova blazed forth in the constellation of Taurus and was recorded by Chinese astronomers. It, too, was brighter than Venus at the start, and it, too, faded only slowly. It remained visible to the eye in daytime for three weeks, and at night for two years.

Except for the Sun and Moon, it was the brightest object in the sky through all of historic times. Oddly enough, no observation of the Taurus supernova have survived from any European or Arabic source.

There is a follow up to this story, though. In 1731, an English astronomer, John Bevis, first observed a small patch of nebulosity in Taurus. The French astronomer Charles Messier published a catalog of foggy objects forty years later, and the Taurus nebulosity was first on the list. It is sometimes known as M1, therefore.

In 1844, the Irish astronomer William Parsons (Lord Rosse) studied it, and noting the claw-like processes extending in all directions, called it the Crab nebula. That is the generally accepted name today.

Not only is the Crab nebula at the precise spot recorded for the 1054 supernova, but it is clearly the result of an explosion. The gas clouds within it are being driven outward at a speed which can be measured. When calculated backward, it is apparent that the explosion took place 9 centuries ago.

A tiny star was detected at the center of the Crab Nebula in 1942 by the German-American astronomer Walter Baade. In 1969, that star was recognized as a pulsar, a rapidly rotating neutron star. It is the youngest pulsar known, since it is the most rapidly rotating (thirty times a second) and it is

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all that is left of the giant star that exploded in 1054.

The Crab Nebula is about 2,000 parsecs away, not very far as distances go in the Galaxy, so it is not surprising that the display was so magnificent. (The more distant supernovas of 1572 and 1604 have left no detectable neutron stars behind.)

There may, however, have been an even more astonishing event in prehistoric times.

About 11,000 years ago, at a time when, in the Middle East, human beings were soon to develop agriculture, a star that was only about 460 parsecs away (less than a quarter the distance of the 1054 supernova) exploded.

At its peak, the supernova may have approached the full Moon in brightness and this appearance of a second moon that did not move against the starry background of the sky, that did not show a visible disc or phases, that slowly faded but did not disappear for perhaps three years, must have totally astonished our not-yet-civilized ancestors.

Naturally, no records exist from that time (though there are some symbols on prehistoric sites that may indicate that something unusual had been noted in the sky) but we have indirect evidence.

In 1930, the Russian-American astronomer Otto Struve detected a large area of nebulosity in the sky in the constellation of Vela, which is far down in the southern sky, and is totally invisible from positions as far north as New York.

This nebulosity is in the form of a shell of gas and dust which was driven out from the Vela supernova 11,000 years ago. It is much the same sort of phenomenon as the Crab nebula, but it has been expanding for over twelve times as long a period of time so that it is much larger.

It was investigated in detail in the 1950's by an Australian astronomer, Colin S. Gum, and is known as the Gum nebula in consequence. The near edge of the nebula is only about 92 parsecs from us, and, at the rate at which it is now expanding, it may move across the Solar system in about 4,000 years or so. However, the matter it contains is so thin by now (and will be thinner in 4,000 years) that it is not likely to affect us in any perceptible way.

When will the next visible supernova appear? And what star is it that will explode?

If we could only have observed a nearby supernova in the process of explosion with the full battery of modern instruments, we might be able to answer the question with considerable precision, but, as I said, we are com-

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pleting a four-century desert as far as these events are concerned.

Nevertheless, we know a few things. We know, for instance, that the more massive a star is, the more quickly it consumes its core fuel, the shorter its life as an ordinary "main sequence star," and the more rapid and catastrophic its collapse is.

Even a star as large as our Sun will only blow off a minor fraction of its mass, when the time comes, and will then collapse sedately into a white dwarf. The blown-off mass will expand outward, forming what is called a "planetary nebula," because it is seen as a ring about a star and such a ring was thought, a hundred years ago, to serve as precursor to planet formation.

In order to have a real explosion and a collapse to a neutron star, the mass of the star has to be 1.4 times the mass of the Sun as an absolute minimum, and, very likely, a good explosion will require a star that is up to 10 or 20 times the mass of the Sun.

Such stars are rare indeed. There may not be more than one star in 200,000 or so that is massive enough for a good supernova. Still, that leaves about 100,000,000 of them in our Galaxy, and perhaps 300,000 in our visible corner of it. These giant stars have a lifetime on the main sequence of only one to 10 million years (as compared to about 10 to 12 billion years for the Sun) so they explode frequently, on the astronomic scale.

You might wonder why the giant stars haven't exploded by now if supernovas are forming once every decade. At that rate, all the giant stars would be gone in one billion years and the Galaxy is nearly 15 billion years old. In fact, if they only endure a few million years before exploding, why did they not all disappear in the childhood of the Galaxy?

The answer is that more are constantly being formed and that all the giant stars that exist anywhere in the Galaxy now, came into being only 10 million years ago or less.

There's no way in which we can watch all of them constantly, but there's no need to. The beginning of the slide to supernova-dom is easily noticeable, and we need concentrate only on those who have made that beginning.

When a star reaches the end of its stay on the main sequence, it begins to expand. It reddens as it does so, since its surface cools with expansion. It becomes a red giant. This is a universal step. Some time in the future — anywhere from 5 to 7 billion years from now — our Sun will become a red giant, and the Earth may be physically destoyed in the process.

The more massive a star, the larger the red giant stage, of course, so what we must look for are not just massive stars, but massive red giants.

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The nearest red giant is Scheat in the constellation of Pegasus. It is only about 50 parsecs away and its diameter is about 110 times that of the Sun. This is small as red giants go, and if this is as big as it is going to get, it is probably no more massive than the Sun and will not ever be a supernova. If it is still expanding, it has a considerable way to go before exploding.

Mira, which I mentioned earlier in the article, is 70 parsecs away, has a diameter 420 times that of the Sun, and is definitely more massive than the Sun.

There are three red giants more massive still, however, each of them being about 150 parsecs away. One of these is Ras Algethi in Hercules, with a diameter 500 times that of the Sun, and another is Antares in Scorpio, with a diameter 640 times that of the Sun. (That is why I can't help but keep an eye on Antares when I am on Bermuda. Just imagine if I happen to be looking at it at the very moment it decides to blow, and I watch it increase in brightness to well beyond that of Venus in the space of an hour or less. Wow!)

Larger still is Betelgeuse in Orion. It is not only large, but it is pulsating, and its brightness varies. This might indicate the kind of instability that could well precede explosion. It is as though the star keeps collapsing and then, as pressure rises at its core, a little more energy is squeezed out, so that it expands again. (Such pulsation is also found in Mira.)

Astronomers, however, have now discovered what may be the best candidate. It is Eta Carinae, in the constellation Carina. This is an enormous red giant, even larger than Betelgeuse, and it has a mass estimated to be a hundred times that of the Sun.

It is surrounded by a cloud of dense and expanding gas, which it may be giving off in what we might consider its death throes. What's more, it shows marked and irregular changes in brightness, either because it is pulsating, or because we sometimes see it through breaks in the surrounding cloud and sometimes see it obscured.

It can become bright indeed. In 1840, it was the second brightest star in the sky, surpassed only by Sirius (although, to be sure, Eta Carinae is well over a thousand times as far away as Sirius is).

Right now, Eta Carinae is too dim to see with the unaided eye. However, its radiation is absorbed by the cloud about it, and re-radiated as infrared. The energy it is emitting can be grasped when it is realized that it is the strongest infrared-radiating object in the sky outside our own Solar system.

Finally, astronomers have recently detected nitrogen in the cloud it is ejecting, and they judge that this, too, indicates a late stage in the pre-supernova changes. The betting seems to be that Eta Carinae can't last

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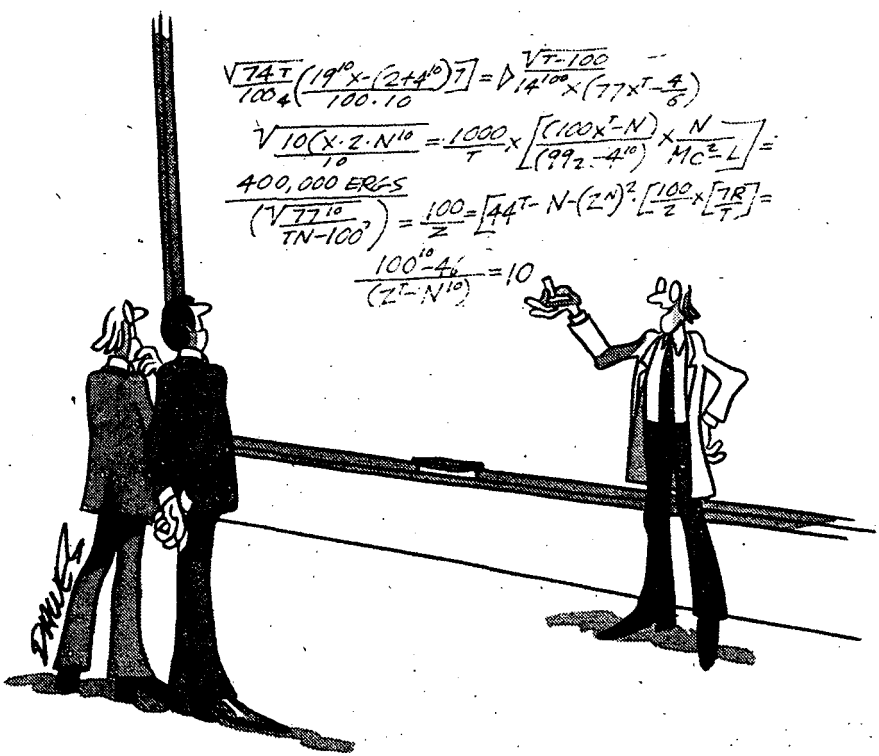
more than 10,000 years at most. It might also blow up tomorrow. Since it takes 9,000 years for light to travel from Eta Carinae to us, it is possible that the star has already exploded and that the light of that explosion is well on its way to us. In any case, astronomers are ready and waiting.

The catches? Two!

First, Eta Carinae is about 2,750 parsecs away, nearly twenty times as far away as Betelgeuse, and the brilliance of the supernova will be somewhat dimmed by the extra distance.

Second, the constellation, Carina, is far in the southern sky, and the supernova, when it comes, will not be visible in Europe or in most of the United States.

But then, you can't have everything.



"Except in Nebraska, of course."

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This story takes one of the big, classic sf themes, time travel, and compresses it to the personal vision of one man. The man's name is Katzman, his power is awesome and he is determined to get things right. Given the same gift, wouldn't we all?

Revisions

BY

GORDON EKLUND

1

Katzman has only just now returned home from the revival movie-house on Ventura Avenue where for the fifth time tonight — May 22, 1980 — he has sat through a double bill of Robert Altman features, *Quintet* and *Three Women*. This time back in his apartment he is not alone. As has occurred the previous three times, a skinny, blonde, freckled-face girl stands beside him. A much younger girl than Katzman, if the truth be known, for although he was born a mere twenty-five years ago by the calendar, he has actually lived somewhere between forty-five and fifty years. At one time he kept diligent track of the specific time involved, scribbling copious, careful notes in a succession of spiral binders, like any explorer experiencing new lands for the first time, but gave up the practice three calendar months back when the desire to revise what he had already written got dangerously out of hand. The girl with him tonight is probably nineteen. A freshman, at best a sophomore, at the local university. She has a name which he has forgotten. Like most girls of her generation she reminds him more than anything of a lean, soft-skinned boy. Katzman is seriously wondering whatever possessed him to bring her here in the first place — or the second or the third. Why hadn't he simply let well enough alone the first time and been content with watching the stupid Altman movies, coming home, a couple of glasses of wine, maybe some tv, then bed and sleep? But no, he had to go back to the beginning and revise. Well, it hadn't worked out. Three times already tonight he has had sexual relations with this girl. If he were feeling in a mischievous mood right now he could tell her all about the butterfly mark on her

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chest directly beneath the nub of her left breast. But he isn't feeling mischievous. He is feeling tired — and bored. Thinking of her left breast, his body — aware of what has already taken place tonight — gives a mildly responsive stir. Now Katzman recalls what originally motivated him to pick up the girl: pure and simple lust. Ah well, he thinks, enough is plenty. Although eager to learn and possessed of a certain amount of raw passion, the girl had simply failed to achieve the smooth perfection that Katzman demands from the final draft of his life. As a result the need to delete her presence stands plain. And that of course is the reason behind this fifth and, he hopes, final revision of the evening.

Katzman turns to the girl, tilting on the balls of his feet. "Good movies, weren't they?" he says glibly, not even giving her time to find her way to the couch. The other times he plied her with wine, a lesser vintage on each occasion.

"I don't know." Her face is a youthful blank. "I thought that first one was, you know, kind of gross."

Inwardly he mouths the words she speaks. The first two times, feigning interest, he replied, "Oh, really? Why?". The third time he let it pass. This fourth time, polishing, Katzman says, "That's rather a stupid thing to say."

She stares at him incredulously. "Huh?"

"I said you were stupid."

"Well ... well ... well, I'm not the only one."

"No, but you're quite enough."

"Well ... fuck you, buster." She strides boyishly to the door, hurls it open, and as she leaves, tosses over a shoulder, "You could have told me you were a fag." She slams the door, departing.

Katzman is livid. All that work for nothing. The intial draft and four successive revisions, and what does he have to show for it? A cheap, lame, adolescent insult. He is beginning to think that the only sure way to resolve his dilemma is to return once again all the way back to the beginning — seven o'clock this evening — attend the movies and just ignore the pea-shaped blonde head in front of him, sit somewhere else, across the aisle, no place close to the goddamned girl. But in order to achieve that a full five-hour revision will be necessary and, to be honest, Katzman is getting a bit sick of these two movies. He could go somewhere else, of course. A different moviehouse. Or no movies at all. He plops down on the couch, picks up the *TV Guide* and flips through the program listings for earlier in the evening. A two-hour special on the crisis in Iran on Channel 3. He could just stay home and watch that. But why should he give a shit about Iran? If things like that were at all important to him, he wouldn't be sitting here now; he'd be on his way back six months in time to

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warn Carter to keep the Shah out of the country. But Katzman is a cautious man. He has been granted an awesome power and has never regarded it as anything other than *his* power, something to be used in personal, private ways. Like with that girl. Kim. That is her name. A boy's name, he thinks with a smirk, dropping the *TV Guide*. He glares at the clock on the wall. Approaching one a.m. All this time, time had continued to pass. He might as well get on with it. Shutting his eyes Katzman concentrates on the particular past instance, experiences a lurch in his gut, and then springs backward through time.

2

Katzman stands in the living room of his apartment, tilting on the balls of his feet. The girl — Kim — gazes blankly at him and says, "I don't know. I thought that first one was, you know, kind of gross."

"That's rather a stupid thing to say," says Katzman.

Her whole body stiffens in shock. (He missed that the other time.) She stares at him incredulously. "Huh?"

"I said you were stupid."

"Well ... well ... well, I'm not the only one."

"No, but you're quite enough."

"Well ... fuck you, buster." She strides boyishly past him, hurls open the door and pauses briefly. "You could have told me you were a fag." She starts to close the door.

"I wasn't," he says quickly, "until I got a good look at you."

The door slams shut.

Katzman collapses on the couch in an exhausted heap, breathing hard from the strain of the revision. It's done, it's done, he insists to himself. Five times now he has replayed the hours between seven p.m. and twelve midnight, May 22, 1980, and now at last he has got it right. Still, a vague uncertainty lingers. He can't help wondering what might happen if he were to return to the moviehouse and sit somewhere else. After all, there were other lonesome girls in attendance tonight; this is a college town, full of the wanton and willing. Two calendar months have now passed since Katzman last performed successful, final-draft copulation with a member of the opposite sex. Or with any sex for that matter, for despite the girl's intimation his love life is actually conventional. His body remains achingly conscious of the deprivation even if his mind is not. Of course, there is always tomorrow. He tries to convince himself that this is the wisest alternative. Sleep now and then, if the ache remains, try again tomorrow. But come tomorrow he will be one day older. One day closer to — something he rarely admits — the inevitable grave. Katzman staggers to his feet, propelling himself into the bathroom, where he gulps down three round green sleeping tablets. To the bedroom. The sheets no longer smelling of the girl. He glimpses her in his

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mind's eye. Pale skin. Thin lips. Butterfly birthmark. Was she really all that bad? With a certain amount of polishing, a different word here, a different caress there, might she not have been guided toward some state of real perfection? He clenches his fists, wanting for sleep to overwhelm him. The desire to revise is at its peak now. Only through sleep can Katzman fully obliterate the terrible urge.

Asleep, Katzman dreams of how it began. He is nineteen years of age. One of those fraternity beerblasts that always seem so wonderful in retrospect but which are actually boring as hell at the time. Not that he belongs to a fraternity. An acquaintance had brought him. Drunkenly Katzman is attempting to make time with a girl named Michelle. Blonde of course. Tanned skin. Turned-up nose. Southern California antecedents. Tall. The property, he learns later, of a certain senior — a defensive tackle on the varsity football team, though not a starter — named, of all things, Wittgenstein. Katzman paws drunkenly at the girl's breasts. Wittgenstein, taking offense, punches him in the face. Katzman dreams of the blow, although in reality it had no longer occurred. Wittgenstein swings, Katzman feels the force of the punch through the blur of too much beer, and topples backward, landing on his butt. Wittgenstein towers over him, fists like hamhocks, face beet red, and says, "You got anything else you want to try?" Katzman looks up, opens his mouth as if to reply, and vomits in his own lap. Wittgenstein, laughing, drops a possessive paw on the girl's left shoulder and says to the party as a whole, "Whoever brought this scumbag better get him out of here before I puke too." As he sits there, too much in pain even to consider moving of his own volition, Katzman thinks of all the different ways he could have handled this situation and avoided what now seems — at age nineteen — like the ultimate humiliation. And as he does, suddenly, he is there again, with his hand stretching toward Michelle's rather modest breasts. During this first jump he is far too bewildered to make any revisions with the result that the entire scenario is played out as before. He fondles the girl, she glares at him, Wittgenstein sidles heavily over, the punch is thrown, Katzman falls, lands, vomits. "Whoever brought this scumbag better get him out of here before I puke too." His acquaintance conveys Katzman home in embarrassed silence. Later, lying alone on his bed in the dark, keenly aware of the stench from his own clothes, watching the ceiling revolve hazily above, he thinks, *Did I make all that up or did it happen? For God's sake, did I really jump back through time?* No, he decides, he was just drunk. It was the beer. He should have left the girl alone. He should have told Wittgenstein what he thought of him. He should have thrown Michelle

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on the floor and taken her on the spot. He should have kicked that bastard's feet out from under him. He should have—

He jumps again. At the party — beside the girl. He starts to reach for her breasts and then, with a tremendous effort of will, snatches his hand away. The party swirls on, unaware of the monumental revision that had occurred. Later Katzman will revisit this scene dozens of time. In one draft — his favorite — he leaves the party early, steals a handgun from a weird friend in the dorm, returns to the frat house and blows Wittgenstein's tiny little brain all over the walls. Naturally — if sadly — this revision cannot be allowed to stand. Finally he chooses simply to stay home from the party and read *Goodbye, Columbus* by Roth, a class assignment. Even now on occasion he thinks of new alternatives he failed to come up with at the time. It still seems possible to have somehow managed to pry Michelle loose from Wittgenstein for a final, total triumph. He cannot go back there again, however. To jump that far would necessitate reliving all six intervening years. Someday perhaps he will do it. The day before he knows he's going to die he'll jump back in time to the beginning and start all over again: if he gets the chance to know when he's going to die. The future is as much forbidden to him as the past prior to the party. It all begins there. With Wittgenstein's punch. Perhaps the blow affected his brain. His sense of time perception was warped. It might of course be nothing more than delusion. Maybe he has never really traveled through time. Maybe Wittgenstein killed him and this is his brain's technique to avoid admitting that it is dead. Maybe ... bullshit. If he's crazy, the madness is his own — and he's learned to live with it. He firmly believes he is traveling through time and whether he is or not, what difference does that make? *Cogito ergo sum.*

4

In the morning at seven Katzman awakes, brews coffee, scrubs his face with cold water, brushes his teeth. The coffee is dreadful — far too strong. With a sigh, he closes his eyes, jumps, rises from bed again at seven, fixes the coffee with more care than before, scrubs his face, brushes his teeth. He goes to the front door, opens it and finds no morning paper. The young woman across the hall — an elementary school teacher with an Italian name, Anna Ramana or something like that, curly blonde hair and huge pendulous breasts — has more than likely borrowed it. He knows she does that sometimes, since he normally rises much later in the day and the paper is back in place when he wants it. His body suddenly begins to ache from the deprivation. Anna Ramana is a woman he has noticed before. Without much forethought Katzman jumps back in time to the previous night, sets

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his alarm for six a.m., slides between the sheets, dreams of Wittgenstein, awakes, dresses hastily, brews coffee, rushes to the front door, places his ear against it, waits impatiently till he hears the door across the hall give a solid squeak, then hurls it open. Like a vision from paradise, Anna Ramana appears before him, leaning way down, knees demurely bent, one hand already touching the newspaper. She wears scanty pajamas and a thigh-length robe that conceals nothing essential. Katzman sucks in his breath and repeats the words he has already polished: "Since we're both interested in the news, why don't you join me and we can read the paper together? I have coffee."

"I loathe coffee," she says, ducking back into her own apartment and slamming the door. Now what? wonders Katzman bitterly. He crosses the hall, puts his ear casually close to her door and hears a loud masculine voice emanating from within. Goddamn, he thinks, another five hours wasted. He feels drained from insuffient sleep. He storms back into his apartment, flops on the couch, drops the paper on the floor, and after a moment reaches down and retrieves the sports section. He scans the early season baseball standings without much interest. The Pirates and Orioles will in the end emerge triumphant. That's the most spiritually debilitating effect of living a revision — the lack of surprise in both the big and little details of day-to-day living. Thinking this, his eyes happen to stray to the top of the page. The date glares out at him — May 23, 1980. He feels a spasm of honest fear. For God's sake, this is 1980, not 1979. This is brand new, unpolished terrain. The pennant races remain a total mystery to him, the same as the presidential election, the fate of the American hostages in Iran, the true purposes of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, etc. Still anxious, he picks up the front page — which he seldom if ever bothers to read — and glances at the headlines. As far as he can determine, nothing cataclysmic has occurred during the night. No war. No earthquake. The nearest active volcano several hundred miles northward. He lets go of the paper, rubs his eyes, and thinks seriously about a jump. But to when? The previous night in order to obtain a shade more rest? But what about the girl? Sweet young Kim? Another stab at her is not out of the question. The further she recedes into the mists of the past, the less overwhelming her deficiencies appear. And the two Altman movies? Pretentious, yes, but not uninteresting; he could watch them again, couldn't he? Or how about two weeks ago, dinner with friends, when his usual flowing wit emerged rather flat, a Kennedy joke uttered before he discovered that the wife was serving as county campaign coordinator for Senator Ted? Or last year when he went so far as to lay marriage plans before backing out at the last moment and

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conducting a major revision, wiping the future Mrs. Katzman totally from his life? He had been in love with her — hadn't he? Was another attempt at matrimony really such a wild idea? Hell, there was so much that could be changed — perhaps ought to be changed. And why stop there? Why not undertake a full-scale jump? Kill Wittgenstein again and this time do it in such a way that he would never be suspected of the deed. How about blonde Michelle for a piece of tail — or even a wife? Now that would be the ultimate irony — the ultimate perfection. And it could be arranged. Christ, with all of time at his beck and hail anything — everything — could be arranged. The seriousness with which he entertains these thoughts disturbs him. Standing hastily, he races into the back bedroom, sits down in front of the typewriter, switches it on, inserts paper. He makes his living as a writer of erotic literature. He begins to compose a new book — a case history of modern perversions. Halfway down the first page, he is absolutely convinced that he has written this book before. He kills an hour searching his files, finding nothing. By the time he gets back to the typewriter, inspiration has fled. He had no alternative now but to jump. Beginning anew, he composes a wholly different book, a novel with a Lesbian theme. Write what you know. They taught him that in school. No wonder he dropped out in the middle of his junior year.

5

Why isn't Katsman a wealthy, powerful man?

Well, he could be of course, and briefly in the past he has flirted with all the obvious possibilities. A glance at the afternoon stock market quotations, a leap back through time, some wise investments. An afternoon spent watching the Kentucky Derby on tv, then back to the week before and a visit to his neighborhood bookmaker. The Pirates over the Orioles in the '79 series, four games to three. But what would be the point? His writings bring in more than enough money to support his modest habits. As for power, well, as far as he can see he already has that. The power to control his own destiny. How many people — no matter how rich — can claim that? Besides, the amassing of wealth and power would necessitate a considerable investment of time. Stocks do not often rise dramatically in a few short days. In order to build up a real fortune, he would have to spend endless weeks and months reliving the same old shit. Not that he hasn't placed an occasional bet. But it has never become an obsession. Katzman is very much a child of his time — the 1970's. *Time* or *Newsweek* could do a cover piece on his mind-set. To Katzman only his personal self is truly of supreme interest — and consequence. The one goal in his life remains to live as perfect and satisfying an existence as possible within the fluctuating boundaries of his own

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personhood. And that, he firmly believes, he has done. Not that he has anything with which to compare it. There is no way of knowing how he might have turned out without the gift of revising. For all he knows he might now be dead. Crushed by a falling meteorite. He might also be rich and famous. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he feels miserably depressed. Maybe it really is time to sweep aside the book of his life until now and begin again. But why?

6

His writing career, upon which he embarked after quitting college, has gone decently. In the beginning his publishers paid him a meager $250 per book and now it is up to a cool grand. He never rewrites a single word and has never used his real name. He has written well over a hundred books without making the slightest ripple in the vast pool of world literature. Except once, two years ago, when the crusading prosecuting attorney of Pickham County, Illinois, seized one of his books and declared it obscene. The case never came to trial and the only real fallout occurred when his name leaked out and a local radio station called and invited him to appear on a talkshow. Those fifteen minutes on the air turned out to be the longest of his life. Once again Katzman was thankful for the fact that he never wanted to be rich and powerful. The rich and powerful are expected to speak for the ages. Katzman consumed a full three months speaking for fifteen minutes, minus commercial breaks. Live and unrehearsed: the Tom Drummond Show. Christ, he ended up revising some of his answers twenty and thirty times. In the end, still dissatified, he threw up his hands, jumped back a full day in time, waited for the station to call and refused to answer the phone. He has come to realize that his own life is sufficiently complex; he cannot possibly cope with the strain of the ages.

7

He is just finishing his third cup of coffee when someone taps softly on the front door. To Katzman's vast surprise the tapper turns out to none other than Anna Ramana. She is dressed in a tight velour blouse and blue fashion jeans. Fixing him with a smile of madonna-like effulgence, she says, "I came to apologize for what happened this morning and to bring you this." From behind her back she reveals a copy of the afternoon newspaper. "Fair is fair," she says.

For a moment Katzman is literally struck dumb. This event has come utterly without advance warning and he has absolutely nothing prepared for the occasion. His skin breaks out in a prickly sweat. Panic tempts him to jump immediately and ignore her tapping when it comes again.

"Well?" she says finally. "Don't tell me the coffee is gone already."

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"Oh, no," says Katzman, miraculously rediscovering the power of speech. "There's — uh — plenty in the pot.'

"Then does your offer still hold?"

"I thought you didn't like coffee."

She winks broadly. "You must have misunderstood me. I adore coffee."

"Then do — I mean, please come in."

She glides past him, bathing him in the effervescent odor of her perfume. She takes two sugars in her coffee, no cream. When he brings it, she is already seated on the couch.

"I've been wanting to meet you for a long, long time," she says solemnly, as he sits in the chair opposite her. "You're a writer, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"What do you write?"

"Oh, stories — fiction."

"That must be a fascinating way to make a living."

"I suppose it is — sometimes."

"I was so embarrassed by what happened this morning. The way you jumped out at me. I was startled."

He concedes that his action might be in need of some revision.

She does not seem puzzled by his choice of expression. "I think I had it coming. You see, my father has been visiting me. If I'd stayed in the hall and talked with you the way I wanted, he might have gotten worried and come out. He's very protective." Another broad wink. "With reason."

"Reason?" Katzman manages.

"Oh, yes. You see, I'm what you might describe as a very spontaneous person."

"And your — your father?"

"I dropped him at the airport an hour ago."

"Then you're..."

"Alone," she finishes.

"You don't work?"

"I decided to take the day off. I'm free — absolutely free." She drapes her arms over the top of the couch, thrusting her chest forward, and licks her lips enticingly.

Katzman stares at her in consternation and disbelief. But, after all, isn't this what he has been seeking? Nonetheless, even as he moves over to sit beside her, he feels as trepidacious as a soldier tiptoeing across an enemy minefield. He has planned none of this. It is just ... happening. Like life. Like anyone's life. Even after the two of them have gone to the bedroom, Katzman is still seriously considering the possibility of making a final, lunging, desperate jump through time.

8

As he lies in bed beside Anna Ramana (whose real name, it turns out, is Angela Reboza), Katzman thinks how the gift of revision has altered and improved his life in so many different ways. At the age of nineteen, when Wittgenstein hurled his punch, Katzman was still a virgin. Within two days, real time — two months, sub-

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jective time — that peculiar condition had been obliterated forever. And not just sex either. Take school, for instance. It became so easy. Drop by the classroom, take the exam, scribble a few random answers, receive an F, await the review, memorize the correct answers, jump, take the test again, grab an A. If it didn't work the first time, there was no reason not to keep trying again until he got it right. In fact, that was the primary reason he ended up quitting school: he felt he was spending his whole life taking exams. Near the end he made a valiant effort to return to the old way of study and memorization but even then found himself incapable of letting well enough alone. An A wasn't enough; he had to achieve perfection. Writing proved a most satisfactory means of making a living. Especially erotic writing. One time he did try to compose a serious novel but after rewriting the first page several dozen times gave up the idea and went back to work on *Hotpants Harlot*, his latest contracted opus.

"Kiss me," Angela Reboza says suddenly.

Katzman turns, places his lips against hers, and kisses. "Was it," he asks, as he draws back, "good for you?"

She nods her head against the pillow. "It was."

"Great?"

"Yes."

This time she lifts her head and peers at him oddly. "It was super. Why? Were you worried?"

"I — no. I just wanted—"

"Was it good for you?"

"Oh, yes," he replies honestly. "It was perfect." But that, he knows, is the problem.

9

It isn't until after Angela Reboza has returned to her own apartment that Katzman finally jumps. He returns all the way back in time to the night before and sets his alarm to ring no earlier than nine a.m. Even after rising and finding his newpaper back in place, he moves quietly about the apartment, unwilling to work on his book for fear that the noise of the typewriter may bring the woman out in the open. One time around noon a knock sounds boldly at the door. His body tingles in response but with an effort he ignores the rush of desire and refuses to answer. What, he thinks, is the point of creating a life of polished perfection if spontaneity is allowed to intrude? To permit Angela Reboza to enter his life on her own initiative and direct its flow, if only temporarily, would be to render absurd every precept by which he has lived since the moment of Wittgenstein's blow. When later in the day yet another knock sounds at the door, Katzman is firm and adamant. He folds his arms over his chest and winks to himself. Even his body has now ceased to tingle. He is a man in full control of his own destiny again.

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10

Once darkness has fallen, Katzman chooses to stir. On silent feet he maneuvers down the hallway, descends the staircase and rushes outside. From there, proceeding on foot, it is a relatively short jaunt to the Ventura Avenue business district. He has not eaten all day and his belly, if not his body, is tingling with need. A pizzeria beckons to him. Katzman enters the dark interior, where an electric log flickers in a red plastic fireplace, and orders a small pepperoni. When the pizza arrives it proves a shade too spicy for his taste. Leaping back through time, he orders a small sausage instead. This time the pizza is more to his liking. He washes the meal down with several tall glasses of beer. As he stands to go, his knees wobble precariously. One beer too many, he thinks, and leaping lightly back, he forgoes the final glass.

Outside in the street Katzman spots two movies playing down the block. He has already purchased a ticket before recalling that he has seen both pictures before. Last night, as a matter of fact: this is the same double-bill — *Quintet* and *Three Women* — at which he met that girl whose name he has forgotten, the one with the butterfly birthmark. Still, so much subjective time has passed in the interim that he decides to give it a chance. Once inside, after a half-hour of the first movie, he grows restless. With a spontaneous leap, he finds himself outside the pizzeria again. He starts to cross the street. Halfway to the other side, a shrill, screeching sound like the death cry of a great mythical bird attracts his attention. Jerking his head, he sees the grill of a late model car only inches from his body. Through the windshield, the distorted face of the driver gapes in horror. An instant later Katzman leaps, just soon enough to avoid certain death. Shaken, he finds himself in front of the pizzeria again. Passers-by stare at his stricken, pale face. He hugs his arms to control the trembling. In the street the car that nearly hit him glides past. Watching it, Katzman realizes how fortunate he is to be alive. Without a backward glance he turns and retraces his steps homeward. Across the hall a pale light shows under the door. Entering his own apartment, Katzman makes a great deal of noise. Angela Reboza, however, does not appear. He thinks of her the rest of the night and in the morning rises in time to catch her nabbing his newspaper. She smiles up at him and concedes that she adores coffee. They go inside.

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Letters

We received many letters chiding David Tucker for his not-quite-on-the-mark September letter concerning the correct use of "thee" and "thou."

I agree with reader David Tucker: writers who wish to use archaic English — even *letter* writers — should make every effort to do so correctly. Tucker sought, in September's letter column, to correct George C. Chesbro for treating the singular second-person pronoun "thee" as a plural in the story, "Poems to Play on the Piccolo." Unfortunately, Tucker's demonstrations of "proper" usage were also incorrect; apparently, he forgot that a pronoun has *case* as well as number. For instance it is case that distinguishes "I" (nominative) from "me" (accusative and dative), and also "who" from "whom." In each and every one of his examples, Tucker should have used the nominative "thou," instead of "thee":

**Thou* art a dead fool...
**Thou* hast freely chosen...

The pronoun "thee" is properly used as the object of a verb or preposition, and may also be reflexive:

*I give *thee* all that is mine...
*For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at *thee*...
*Except for *thee* and me...
*Get *thee* gone...
**Thou* seems't to have made a life for *thee* here...

The above examples agree with traditional usage, as reported in G.C. Merriam's unabridged *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. However, I'm neither a professor of English, nor one of the Friends. Should an expert wish to shed even more light on this topic, please, do share the benefit of thy expertise!

By the way, please pass along my new mailing address to your subscription department. I would not want to miss a single issue of a magazine that cares so much about the English Language, that it opens its letter column to a discussion of the proper use of obsolete pronouns!

—JIM MERRITT
Morro Bay, CA

In his letter in the September issue of F&SF, David Tucker is quite right in stating the Quakers' usage of the word "thee." However, there is still the matter of actual correctness of usage. True, the Society of Friends used (and a few still use) the word "thee" in the nominative case: "Thee is," "Thee has," and the like. But this is not, and never was, correct English, as orthodox Friends would be the first to admit. The nominative use of "thee" is unique to the Friends (Quakers) and, I believe, to a few other religious groups, particularly in the 19th Century, and is part of what Friends called the "Plain Speech."

But technically, "thee" is the second person familiar form, in the *objective* case. The second person familiar nominative (subjective) case is "thou." In correct English, one would never say "Thee is," but "Thou art." Instead of "Thee has freely chosen" in Mr. Tucker's quotation, the correct form would be "Thou hast freely chosen."

Perhaps the strangest interpretation of these now archaic familiar forms in connection with religious use (in prayers, for example) is one which

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seems to be widely believed: i.e, that such usage is a sign of respect or formality. Quite the opposite is true. These forms, like "du," "dir," and "dich" in German (which still makes use of the familiar forms, as do many other modern European languages), are used only in speaking or writing to members of one's immediate family or to very close and dear friends (or sweethearts). Thus in religious usage, they denote precisely the opposite of formality, since they indicate the very close and intimate relationship between oneself and one's God.

—DAVID L. JONES
Kaneohe, Hawaii

Also in the September issue, we published a letter from Sherry Gottlieb, owner of A Change of Hobbit bookstore, under the heading: Have young people stopped reading SF? The letters that follow are a sample from the dozens of responses we received.

I share Ms. Gottlieb's dismay at the lack of readership among the very young, and, sadly, I can confirm it in my own experience. I am a college English teacher and the mother of two grade-school-aged children. In my freshman composition classes, I find that only a handful of students have read a novel, start to finish, in the past year. Some of them aren't even assigned novels to read as seniors in high school! Most of their choices are lightweight bestsellers, and the student's can't remember the authors' names. They don't even recognize the names of many classic authors whose works were required reading when I was in high school. They are much more likely to be familiar with novels that have recently been made into films.

My children are even worse. They live in a house full of books but might as well be marooned on an island with nothing but "Garfield Gains Weight." They prefer TV, video games, movies, anything that doesn't require much brain power or imagination. I accused my eight-year-old daughter of not knowing how to play make-believe with great abandon, as I did when I was a child. Then I realized that the raw material of which make-believe is made (stories in books, oral story-telling, creative play with few props) has been conspicuously absent from her life. She hasn't the patience any longer to listen to a story being read to her and can't bear a page without a picture.

In short, children are losing the ability to *listen*. Mind you, when they were pre-schoolers I read to both my children regularly and thought it was only the beginning of a lifelong love of books for them. It has only been since the advent of "peer pressure" and the outside world that their tastes have become regrettable.

I have tried to set aside quiet reading time in our house, but when I look in on the children, they are playing idly with a Rubic's cube or staring down the clock. I have even bribed them, offering to pay a certain price per book read, but to no avail. I tell them (excitedly) the plot of an sf adventure novel that would be just right for them, and they counter with a description (complete with sound effects) of the newest video game in the arcades. How do they know about these things? I don't even take them to arcades. There must be video games on the playgrounds!

As a teacher and parent, I struggle to infuse a little imagination, a sense of wonder, a sense of discrimination into the otherwise impoverished brains of

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young people. Ms. Gottlieb is probably right — if children aren't reading sf, they probably aren't reading anything. I can't help but think that they, and we, will be sorry if a whole generation loses the age-old arts of reading, listening, and, consequently, writing.

—KATHY ROMER
Winchester, MA

People don't read fiction now, that's the ominous trend to which you refer at the end of Ms. Gottlieb's letter. I'll tell you something: I don't read fiction very often these days. Why? Because it's boring. I can't get through an issue of F&SF (sorry), for example. A friend of mine raves about ANALOG, but I can't read it, either. He's a lot younger than I am. (I'm 40.) Books bore me. Writers are trying to be cute. There's no plot any more. I still read mysteries when I can find one that's not cute. At least some mysteries still have plot.

Blaming the ominous trend on movies, TV, and video games has already become a cliché — but don't let that stop you from seeing the truth. I was more caught up in the movie *Blade Runner* than I have been in any recent book. Same goes for Carpenter's version of *The Thing*. Television is mostly barf, but kids love it. Sight and sound have an impact that's tough competition for printed words.

I was read to as a kid, before television. I read all through grade school. I remember books as special, fascinating, entertaining. I read books that I hated to put down, and I was sorry when they ended. Now I read books that I put down after page 20 and never pick up again. Or, if I finish, my reaction is "What a piece of crap."

The point of reading is entertainment. (Critics and other literary snobs can shake their heads, but entertainment is the main purpose — ask a reader.)

I would suggest that kids and other people, too, no longer read today, not only SF, but most other fiction, because there isn't very much being written that's entertaining and well-written. And I think it's simply going to get worse.

—M.K. MCCLINTICK
Indianapolis, IN

While I do not disagree with Ms. Gottlieb in her letter in which she discusses an upsetting trend among young readers, I feel that there are other factors contributing to the decrease in book purchases, to wit, the cost of books today. I read almost ten books a week, of which 75% are science-fiction. Yet, in the past two months I have purchased only five paperbacks. When the *minimum* price of a paperback is $3.00, and often the cost can be as high as $4.50, it is time to stop buying and start haunting the libraries, used book dealers, and collections of friends. In fact, I have participated in a sharing arrangement with other avid readers where collectively we buy only one copy of each book we want to read.

If someone who is making a more than adequate living — myself, that is, — doesn't want to pay the outrageous prices now decorating the paperback shelves of stores (I don't even *look* at hardcovers anymore), how can younger readers with no fixed sources of income be expected to buy books? Certainly in many cases TV, video games, etc. are pulling away potential readers. Some of the flow has to be attributed to the lack of dollars, though. I support the attitude that Ms. Gottlieb expresses that parents should take to-

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wards their children; but they will have to be able to back it up with cold cash if children are going to go back to buying books.

—MICHAEL TAVISS
Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada

I am well aware of the fact that young people are not reading as much as they used to. Blame it on education cutbacks, TV, the atom bomb, ingrown toenails or whatever. But for goodness sakes *don't blame video games.*

I am so sick of hearing about the "evils" of video games I could scream. Since when is playing a good game of Donkey Kong such a big crime? Video games are a fun way to spend some free time, help let off a little steam and make coping with "the real world" just a little bit easier. It also helps develop hand-to-eye coordination.

Ms. Gottlieb, if you want to blame something for young people not reading, why not TV? There's more violence, sex, and cruelty in the 6:00 news alone than in an entire video arcade.

While we're at it, we can also blame the schools themselves. The majority of high school graduates cannot write a grammatically correct sentence. SAT scores are down and educational budget cuts aren't helping any. Drugs are easy to obtain in any high school and a lot of kids take advantage of that. At a recent family reunion only one or two (out of six) in the 16-24 age category did *not* take drugs on a regular basis. Sure it's shocking, but facts are facts.

In case you were wondering, I'm 21, have a steady job and a car and am an avid reader besides being a video nut.

—AMY GAMBINO
Princeton, NJ

I just recently picked up your magazine and have been drawn to write in response to Sherry Gottlieb's letter. Unfortunately, what she says is true. I am a fourteen year old, and I constantly hear other teenagers say they don't read because "I read too slow," or "there isn't anything interesting to read!" Like heck!! There are thousands of fascinating books for anyone to read, but what do these future world leaders read? Teen novels and other schlock so nauseating it's a wonder they don't mutate into a lower lifeform.

I would give anything to have a bookstore such as A CHANGE OF HOBBITT in my city. It's an unforgiveable shame people who have such treasures in their cities don't support them.

I also ache because I, too, am a writer, and while I have yet to sell anything, selling a book to 8 percent of the American people, 98 percent of whom buy only one book a year, is not too easy a task.

Perhaps the reason I read books (and magazines) is that I was brought up *expecting* books to entertain, provoke, and anger me. I must have been too far gone down the library aisle when video games became big to have been infected. What a pity. To think I've been wasting my time reading and writing when I could have been wasting my mind and life, watching Pac Man.

—JOHN ZIPPERER
Manitowoc, WI

After reading Sherry Gottlieb's letter I felt I had to write. I am 14, female, and have been reading science fiction since age 11, beginning with Andre Norton. Most of my classmates think me rather strange, but that is the price I

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must pay for enjoying Ellison and Heinlein. Also James P. Hogan, Joe Haldeman, Asimov, etc. I have tried to like the literature written for teenagers and have found it sadly lacking. After all, once you've read Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, Judy Blume just can't cut it! I have even put pen to paper and produced a few stories. However, it is a lonely hobby. A lot of times I wish I could just sit down with someone and really *talk* about authors and novels in an intelligent and knowledgeable way. Unfortunately, it's *still* a wish.

—ANGELA SAVATIEL
Louisville, KY

Perhaps there is an ominous trend started, but I would have hoped that the illustrious field of fantasy and SF would not have stooped to place the blame on the scapegoat of the year: video games. The blame should be placed somewhere, but don't take the easy way out.

It is more than likely a combination of negative influences which have had this effect upon the young readers of the world.

I play video games. I own an ATARI and buy cartridges for it. I listen to rock and roll. I watch television, but I also have a collection of over 150 SF and fantasy books. However, from when I was old enough to understand English as language instead of sounds, my parents *read* to me every night until I was about five. Then I wanted to read to them. Perhaps there could be something to this.

Neither of my parents "grew up" with television, and they both have stressed reading in our house.

Perhaps the effects of television are just now being felt indirectly in the second generation. Perhaps those parents who "grew up" with TV did not encourage reading early enough. By the time kids are fourteen and fifteen, it is too late. Maybe this angle should be examined. I am only sixteen, and as such am not in any position to make judgments.

A word to Ms. Gottlieb: Most of my SF and Fantasy books came from the library. I discovered Fantasy & SF Magazine there. Perhaps — although I admit it is doubtful — your younger customers may have spent their money on PAC-MAN and now must borrow the books?

—MICHAEL LUOMA
Hudson, MA

I am eighteen years old and have been reading since I was four. My interest in science fiction began when I was eight, and in the past ten years since then I have read a great volume of science fiction as well as other types of literature. I agree that youth's interest in *any* type of reading is decreasing. Of the four hundred and thirty members of my graduating class, approximately fifty read for pleasure on a regular basis. The majority of those were big science-fiction fans. I am appalled when I meet new friends and find out that they haven't read a book in a year or two. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is very common. I don't know what the answer to the problem is, but I do know that science fiction is probably the driving force behind the small percentage of youth who do read regularly. Don't give up and keep being a wonderful magazine; there's still hope!

—ANGIE SIMPSON
College Station, Texas

I am a junior at Pioneer High School and I have been enjoying science fiction for 5 or 6 years now and

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so do many of my friends. I started when my brother introduced me to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien when I was in 7th grade and have reread it two more times since. I, in my turn, have introduced it to friends of mine.

Out of my friends, 75% of them have read Tolkien's trilogy. And 50% of my friends read science fiction regularly. My brother (age 19), who is in the army now, sends me books that he had read for me to read and share with my friends. Most of the guys I know read fantasy and science fiction books, but only half the girls. The girls have fallen into reading those trashy sex novels.

Science fiction and fantasy books are alive and well in the little town of Royal Center, Indiana. I hope I speak for a lot of other little towns across this nation, too.

—VERONICA SWANSON
Royal Center, IN

I want to second, and add to, Sherry Gottlieb's suggestion in the September issue. She urges that, in the interest of making readers of the young, each of us choose a book for a child we know and try to interest him in trying it. She also suggests "high adventure of one sort or another as being the most accessible."

Good: even very good. Excellent tactic, faced with the child old enough for high adventure but not yet (or even if he already is) a lover of books. By all means let us seek each a child, feed his habit if he has it, or start him that way if not. But things can be done a lot

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earlier, and I want to suggest one of them, in a couple of forms.

Give books as baby-shower gifts and as family-gifts at Christmas, etc. For a first baby, make it a durable, profusely-illustrated Mother Goose — a fat one. This looks odd among the booties and teething rings, but always pleases, and it usually hastens the time when the parents first start books with the child. If there is an older child choose a collection — either an anthology or single volumes — which will please that child, inscribing it as something *of his* which can be shared with the baby in due time. Parents understand instantly how this keeps noses from getting out of joint; such "baby gifts" are put to use instantly, with pleasure to all concerned. For the family with whom one is on yearly gift-exchange terms, it's obvious how this pattern can be continued.

Books cost money, and there's a lot of competition within the average family budget. Even book-hooked adults often realize how eager, happily, and permanently children can be brought together with print. TV and all such distract. These are the obstacles. The working theory for overcoming them is this: There *are* no people who don't like to read — only those who haven't found what they do like to read. It behooves those of us who have, to give the kids a firm, prompt, expectant start. The fantasy/science fiction market won't take the only benefit.

—DORCAS RICHARDSON
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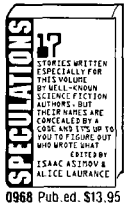
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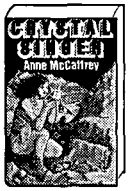

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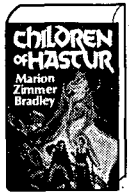

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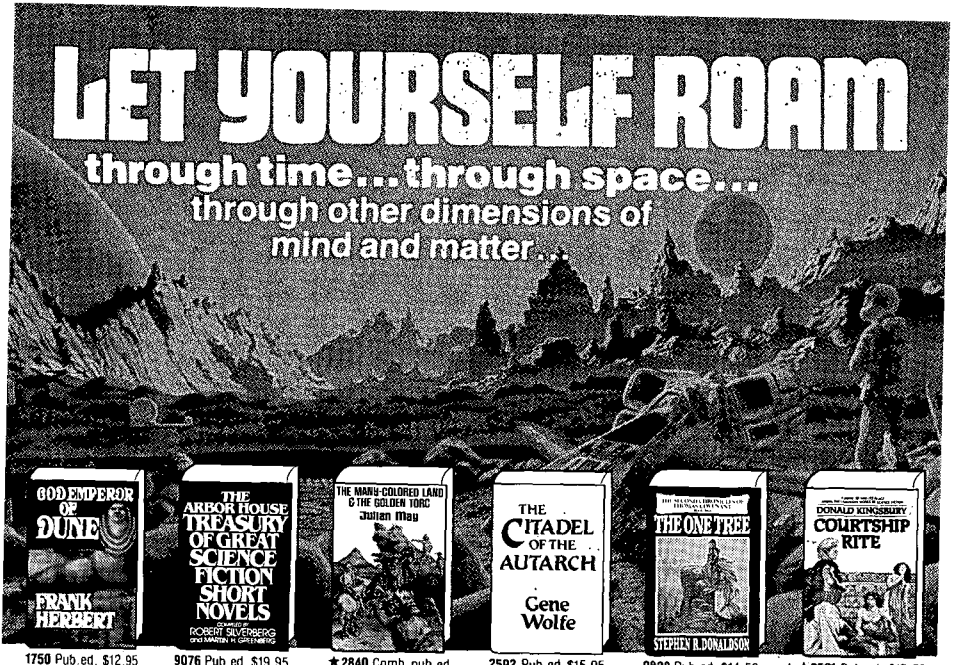
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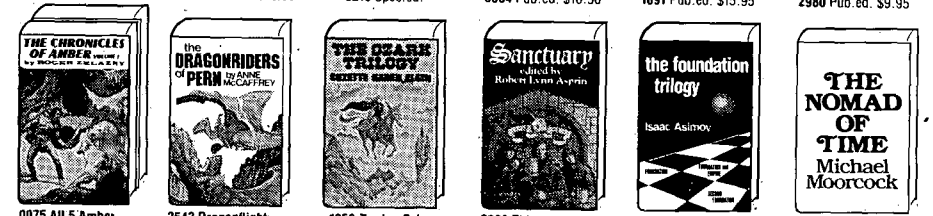

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